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## Editorial Office:

Prabuddha Bharata  
P.O. Mayavati, Via Lohaghat  
Dt. Champawat 262 524, U.P.

## Publication Office:

Advaita Ashrama  
5 Dehi Entally Road  
Calcutta 700 014

Phone (91)(33)244 0898

245 2383

226 8000

Fax 245 0050

E.mail : [advaita@vsnl.com](mailto:advaita@vsnl.com)

<http://education.vsnl.com/advaita>



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# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

ARISE! AWAKE! AND STOP NOT TILL THE GOAL IS REACHED

Vol. 104

JUNE 1999

No. 6

## VEDIC PRAYERS

अतारिष्म तमसस्मारमस्योषा  
उच्छन्ती वयुना कृणोति।  
श्रिये छन्दो न स्मयते विभाती  
सुप्रतीका सौमनसायाजीगः॥

—Rg Veda, 1.92.6

We have transcended darkness. Uṣā is graciously instilling life into all beings. Owning to her splendour, Uṣā appears to be smiling graciously. Brilliant Uṣā (*supratikā*) is destroying darkness so as to bring happiness and well-being to all of us.

उषस्तच्चित्रमा भरास्मभ्यं वाजिनीवति।  
येन लोकं च तनयं च धामहे॥

—Rg Veda, 1.92.13

O Uṣā! You are prosperity itself (*vājiniṇvati*). Please bring plentiful wealth to us using which we may provide for our children and grandchildren.

उषो अद्येह गोमत्यश्वावति विभावरी।  
रेवदस्मे व्युच्छ सूनृतावति॥

—Rg Veda, 1.92.14

O dear Uṣā! You have cows and horses (ie wealth) only for our sake. You are glorious (*vibhāvarī*). You are dear to us like the truthful speech. Please bless us here and now so that we may perform wealthy actions.

युक्त्वा हि वाजिनीवत्यश्वाँ अद्यारूणाँ उषः।  
अथा नो विश्वा सौभगान्या वह॥

—Rg Veda, 1.92.15

O prosperous Uṣā! Harness the golden-coloured horses to your chariot now! And then, bring all that is good (*saubhaga*) to us, riding the chariot.



# About a Great Verse

## EDITORIAL

Is it ever possible for a single verse to contain the essence of the *Bhagavadgītā*? The verse in question is:

*Klaibyaṁ māsmagamah pārtha  
naitat-tvayyupapadyate;  
Kṣudraṁ hṛdaya-daurbalyaṁ  
tyaktvottiṣṭha paramtapa.*

'Yield not to unmanliness, O son of Prthā! Ill does it become thee. Cast off this mean faint-heartedness and arise, O scorcher of thine enemies!'

'... in this one Shloka is embedded the whole message of the *Gītā*,' says Swami Vivekananda.<sup>1</sup> Here is an attempt to understand the import of Swamiji's statement.

### *The Message of the Gītā*

In order to understand the greatness of this verse, we must first of all know what the *Gītā* teaches. Of the tens of mystics, saints, scholars, and savants who have studied and commented on this great text, we shall select only a few to see what they say about this 'fifth Veda'. According to Śaṅkara, who is perhaps the pioneer (and also the greatest commentator), the *Bhagavadgītā* 'is the collection of the quintessence of all the teachings of the Vedas (*tadidaṁ gītāśāstraṁ samastavedārtha-sāra-saṁgrahabhūtam*).'<sup>2</sup> In his commentary on the *Īśa Upaniṣad*, he says that the *Gītā* teaches the knowledge of liberation (*gītānām mokṣa-dharmāṇām*). He also says<sup>2</sup> that it was imparted by 'the Lord to Arjuna who

had sunk into the sea of sorrow and delusion.

Śrī Rāmānuja follows Yāmūnācārya, his preceptor, and says, 'He (the Lord) has revealed the bhakti yoga, prompted by jñāna yoga and karma yoga, which in the Vedānta is declared to be the means of attaining man's supreme end, release, and of which He Himself is the object (*svaviśayaṁ jñāna-karmā-nugṛhītaṁ bhaktiyogaṁ avatārayāmāsa*).'<sup>3</sup>

To Śrīdhara Svāmī, who has written a commentary called *Subodhinī*, Sri Krishna taught the essential knowledge of dharma to Arjuna.<sup>4</sup> In his *Sārārtha-varṣiṇī-ṭīkā* of the *Gītā*, the great Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava scholar, Viśvanātha Cakravartī, says that the *Gītā* is the essence of all the Vedas. Making Arjuna the agent, Krishna wanted to leave a lasting message to the world so that even when he was gone, people could find a way out of sorrow and suffering born of beginningless ignorance. So, says Viśvanātha, the *Gītā* was delivered, which contains teachings on karma yoga in the first six chapters, bhakti yoga in the next six, and jñāna yoga in the final six.<sup>5</sup>

Amongst the other masters of the *Bhagavadgītā*, Madhusūdana Sarasvatī is important. In his *Gūḍhārtha-dīpikā* commentary, he says: 'The Lord has uttered the most esteemed scripture to enlighten those who are eager to attain the supreme Goal, but are now

1. *Gītā*, 2.3, Swami Vivekananda's translation. Cf. Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1989), Vol. 4, pp. 108 and 110. [Hereafter, *Complete Works*.]

2. *sva-prayojanābhāve'pi bhūtānujighṛkṣayā vaidikaṁ dharmadvayaṁ arjunāya śoka-moha-mahādadhau nimagnāya upadideśa*. (See Śaṅkara's Introduction to his *Gītā-bhāṣya*.)

3. J.A.B. van Buitenen, *Rāmānuja on the Bhagavadgītā*, pp. 9 and 47.

4. *dharmajñāna-rahasyopadeśa plavena tasmācchoka-mohāduddhadhāra*. (Introduction.)

5. *svāntardhānottara-kāla-janiṣyamāṇa ... śoka-mohādyākulānapi jīvānuddhartum śāstrakṛt ... tatra adhyāyānām śaṭkena prathamena niṣkāmakarmayogaḥ, dvitīyena bhaktiyogaḥ, tṛtīyena jñānayogo darśitaḥ*. (See Viśvanātha Cakravartī, *Sārārtha-varṣiṇī-ṭīkā*, Introduction.)



filled with sorrow and delusion.' Following the same pattern as that of Viśvanātha Cakravartī, Madhusūdana Sarasvatī feels that the *Gītā* can be divided into three sections, but says that each section deals with one part of the Vedas. According to him, the great scripture delineates about the 'Thou' (*tvam*) aspect in the first six chapters, about the 'That' (*tat*) aspect in the next six, and lastly, about their mutual relationship (*tat tvam asi*) in the final six chapters.<sup>6</sup>

From all that was stated above, we can conclude that the *Bhagavadgītā* contains:

- (1) teachings about karma, jñāna (dhyāna or rāja), and bhakti yogas;
- (2) the essence of the Upaniṣads;
- (3) the essence of the Vedas;
- (4) the essence of Hinduism;
- (5) the essence of universal Religion.

As a consequence, our task is to see if the verse we are discussing really contains all the above in seed form.

### *I. The Royal Roads to Reality*

Before studying this verse's significance, we must know the fundamental ethic of war to understand the significance of Sri Krishna's teaching. Arjuna was a military general, under whose command was a vast army. Just when the war was about to begin, he refused to fight and (perhaps) wanted to become a hermit! Dr. Hiriyanā has hinted at this: what should the warrior's ethic be? A warrior has to fight for his country or king; the country or king may win, but he may not be alive to enjoy the benefit of victory: he may die. Yet, he has to fight. The warrior's life is dependent on fate. If he dies, his family may get some money, that is all. Now, this appears very pessimistic.

Pessimistic, no doubt; only if the warrior has a blinkered attitude. That is, if the warrior considers himself to be only the body or that he is just a warrior, fighting for his nation.

Let alone wars, even our ordinary lives are not any better. Thinking deeply, we shall understand that all life is a battle—a meaningless battle, since we think "we" are limited only to our bodies. Take this gentleman's case, for instance: He has to wake up early, impatiently glance at the morning's newspaper, go grudgingly to the market, run back, hurriedly stuff some food, and run to catch a bus or train to reach his office on time. In the overcrowded bus or train, he has to struggle even to stand, reach the office, do some routine work—perhaps get insulted, perhaps be ill-treated by superiors—and return home at night, tired. The television is perhaps the only solace at night to this sleepy, tired gentleman. And the next day, the same routine continues. Unawares, one fine day, all ends. Is this not a futile battle?

What is the solution to this problem? The problem here is existential, limiting one's existence to the body alone. We are not born to be clerks in some office and die; so also, Arjuna was not born just to fight in a battle. For, if this were to be the end, we are all waging a futile battle, foolishly. It is all a colossal waste. Such a life is really pessimistic.

Krishna's great task at the battlefield of Kurukṣetra was to reveal the basic spiritual principle behind the battle. That warfield was a place where people were at their worst—the brute in the individuals was governing them. It was at such a hell that Arjuna was reminded by Krishna that the former was not mere body or mind. It was the Atman which had worn the body of Arjuna this time. Krishna knew that, but Arjuna did not. Since time immemorial, the Atman is changing bodies and working in various capacities so that it may be released from bondage to enjoy supreme bliss, which has no comparison in all the worlds. So, there is a higher purpose for war, or any endeavour. This brings optimism in life and gives a proper meaning to it. In life's battle also, our Atman is robed as a clerk in one life, a teacher in another, a soldier in some other—all for the release of the Atman's

6. Madhusūdana Sarasvatī, *Gūḍhārtha-dīpikā* (see introductory verses 8,9 and 10 as well as 45 and 46).



bondage. Now, how long can this repeated trips to the world and suffering here continue? It must continue until we know how to work properly so as to be released from bondage. Mere working in different capacities will not help much. We should know the art and technique of work, which alone can cut the bonds that bind the Self asunder.

**a. Karma Yoga:** If Arjuna is not merely the body or mind but the Atman, his purpose of fighting becomes altogether different. And if the *jīvātman* is the supreme Self (Brahman) itself, then everything happens for some higher purpose, according to divine Will. So, in this divine scheme, Arjuna is just a tiny instrument, and so are all of us. Thus, Arjuna need not run away from war out of fear of losing. How does Arjuna work out his salvation? By fixing his mind only on the actions performed, and not on their results. That is, he should not think of the fruits of his actions. Why so? For the simple reason that he has a limited vision, and his concept of fruits is limited to bodily comforts or mental pleasures, as with all of us. We cannot conceive of higher fruits. Therefore, the central principle of karma yoga is:

*Karmaṇyevādhikāraste  
mā phaleṣu kadācana;  
Mā karmaphalahetur-bhūḥ  
mā te saṅgo'stvakarmaṇi.*<sup>7</sup>

Four fundamental points of karma yoga have been stated here: '(1) your right is for action alone; (2) you have no right for the results of action; (3) do not become the agent of the results of action; and (4) may you never be party to inaction.' We all work, but do not know its secret: hence we get bound, and suffer. Now, how to follow the above-mentioned principles of action in our lives? Krishna gives two alternatives: (i) by being united in mind with the Self (*yogasthaḥ kuru karmāṇi*), or (ii) by offering all our actions to God (*tat kuruṣva madarpaṇam*). This is karma yoga, which is dealt with in detail in subsequent verses of the *Gītā*.

Is this idea there in the *śloka* we are dis-

cussing? Following the points mentioned above, our verse can be divided thus: (1) Don't yield to unmanliness (by thinking about the fruits of action); (2) That is unbecoming of you (for, you have no right for the results of action); (3) Give up this faintheartedness (of becoming an agent of the results of action); and (4) Rise up and act (never be party to inaction). It has to be noted that the word *klaibyaṁ* is used by Krishna not to insult his dear friend. Krishna refers to Arjuna's peculiar state of mind in which he (a) neither fights for gains, (b) nor performs work as yoga—the word therefore means indeterminacy.

**b. Rāja Yoga:** Though *rāja yoga* is not mentioned by commentators in their scheme of division of the *Gītā*, we shall study this in passing. Yoga is union (*yujir yoge*). It is the union of the individual self (*jīvātman*) with the supreme Self (*paramātman*). The basic principle of yoga, as stated in the few verses of the sixth chapter of the *Gītā*, can be summarized as follows: He is a yogi who performs actions which are his duty, without depending upon the results; action is the means to attain yoga; when a person does not get attached to sense objects or his actions, he is said to be established in yoga; the yogi should practice constantly, and so on.

In our *śloka*, *rāja yoga* too is implicitly stated. The definition of 'yoga' is, to control mental modifications (*citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ*). This control is possible only by practice and non-attachment (*abhyāsa-vairāgyābhyāṁ tannirodhaḥ*).<sup>8</sup> A yogi should work constantly (*yogī yuñjīta satataṁ*) says the *Gītā*. Such a state of mind where practice and constant alertness are needed should never be given over to faintheartedness. The yogi's mind should always be cheerful and goal-oriented. Hence Krishna asks Arjuna to give up unmanliness and faintheartedness which are unbecoming of him.

**c. Bhakti Yoga:** Of the alternatives given

7. *Gītā*, 2.47.

8. Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*, 1.12.



for the practice of devotion (in the 12th chapter), some are: (1) to think of God alone, (2) to be even-minded and, though one may be a worshipper of the Immutable, be engaged in the welfare of all beings, (3) to dedicate all one's actions to God, (4) to fix one's mind on Him alone, by the yoga of practice, (5) to renounce the results of all actions, since this will lead to peace instantly, and so on. One of the sweetest verses of devotion is:

*Yo na hr̥ṣyati na dveṣṭi  
na śocati na kāṅkṣati;  
Śubhāsubha-parityāgī  
bhaktimān yaḥ sa me priyaḥ.*<sup>9</sup>

'He who is neither elated nor sorrowful, who does not hate nor covet, who is above the dualities of good and bad—such a one is the devotee, who is very dear to Me.' In the verse we are inquiring about, the same teaching is given in a different language. Arjuna was asked not to be sorrowful, not to covet nor hate anything, to rise above dualities of victory and defeat and to engage himself in action, which of course should be selfless. God resides in the heart of every being. Instead of thinking of that supreme Being, Arjuna was given away to weakness of heart. Though he was a scorcher of foes (*param̐tapa*), all foes like fear, worry, sorrow, etc had overpowered him. What should he do at such a time? He should become a devotee and surrender to the Lord. 'Fix your mind on Me, be devoted to Me, sacrifice to Me, and surrender to Me. I promise you, you are dear to Me,'<sup>10</sup> assures the Lord. We can see this idea clearly told in our verse. Instead of being just a charioteer and taking Arjuna back to the tent as instructed by him, Krishna lovingly advises him, and wants Arjuna to listen to him. He asks Arjuna to shake off his delusion, and arise.

**d. Jñāna Yoga:** The central theme of the path of knowledge is the Atman. Behind the body and behind the mind is the Self, the real

'I'. Through discrimination between the unreal and the real, we arrive at the truth that the seemingly finite Atman and the infinite Brahman are non-different; that is the goal of jñāna yoga. The 13th chapter of the *Gītā* gives a wonderful description of the Embodied (*kṣetrajñā*) and the body (*kṣetra*). Earlier, the following grand verse explains the supreme state of a jñāni:

*Eṣā brāhmī-sthitiḥ pārtha  
nainām prāpya vimuhyati;  
Sthitvāsyām aṅtakāle'pi  
brahma-nirvāṇam-ṛchhati.*<sup>11</sup>

'This is the state of being established in Brahman. One does not become deluded after attaining this state. One attains identification with Brahman by being established in this state even towards the end of his life.' In our verse, the teachings of the path of knowledge are implicit. Arjuna's present state is unbecoming of him. Why? Because he is the Self. He is unnecessarily assuming false weakness on himself. By holding on neither to the Self nor to his physical prowess, Arjuna has attained *klibatvam* (indeterminacy) of the heart. Why has it been so? Because Arjuna is deluded. If he had firmly fixed his mind on the Atman, he would not have been deluded, as the *śloka* quoted above says.

In this manner, we see that the verse which Swami Vivekananda eulogizes contains the teachings of all yogas in seed form.

## II. The Essence of the Upaniṣads

A verse from the 'meditation' or introductory verses (*dhyāna ślokas*) of the *Gītā* gives a significant picture of Sri Krishna and the *Bhagavadgītā*:

*Sarvopaniṣado gāvo  
dogdhā gopāla-nandanah;  
Pārtho vatsaḥ sudhīr-bhoktā  
dugdham gītāmṛtam mahat.*

If all the Upaniṣads are cows, if Krishna is the milchman, and if the numerous seekers of God are the enjoyers of the milk, Arjuna is the cause of milking—he is the calf. That is,

9. *Gītā*, 12.17.

10. See *Gītā*, 18.65.

11. See *Gītā*, 2.72.



the *Gītā* is the essence of the Upaniṣads.

What do the Upaniṣads teach? Śaṅkara says: 'All Upaniṣads exhaust themselves in explaining the Atman—*sarvāsām upaniṣadām ātma-yāthātmīya nirūpaṇenaiva upakṣayāt*.'<sup>12</sup> We introduced this discussion with Arjuna's main problem: identifying himself with his body and mind. The thought of defeat at the hands of great warriors opposing him forced him to inaction. Such is the mind that a great hero of universal repute turned into a coward within moments. Therefore Krishna spoke to him about the Atman and called upon his friend to give up weakness and arise.

Looking at it from another angle, we can consider the great sentence (*mahāvākya*), 'Thou art that' (*tat tvam asi*).<sup>13</sup> Unlike ordinary sentences, a *mahāvākya* contains the truth of the entire philosophy in it. The above *mahāvākya* contains the essence of the teachings of the Upaniṣads. As we saw earlier, it was Viśvanātha Cakravarti and Madhusūdana Sarasvatī who said that the three parts of the *Gītā* deal with this *mahāvākya*. Instead of going into details for want of space, we can just consider our verse: in it too, we have the same idea told in a different way. Arjuna was not what he appeared to be, he was something different. Krishna therefore asked him to shake off his superimposition and arise. 'Yield not to unmanliness' deals with the *tvam* aspect. 'That is unbecoming of you' deals with the *tat* aspect. The other part of the *śloka* gives their mutual relation: by shaking off the weakness of heart, *tvam* can become *tat*.

### III. The Essence of the Vedas

The next point is, the *Gītā* being the essence of the Vedas. In his Introduction to the *Gītā* commentary, Śaṅkara says that for the world, the Vedas teach a religion which is twofold: one is of involvement (*pravṛtti-lakṣaṇa*) and the other is of retirement (*nivṛtti-lakṣaṇa*).<sup>14</sup> The Vedas can therefore be understood as teaching the path of active life (dealt with by the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā) and that of renunciation (dealt with by the Uttara Mīmāṃsā). The *Gītā* teaches these paths in

detail. Moreover, Krishna has interpreted the path of action in a novel way, as leading to illumination, by introducing the path of selfless action. Krishna is called the teacher of harmony (*samanvayācārya*); for, he has also said that it is children (the ignorant, *bālāḥ*) who say that the paths of knowledge (*sāṅkhyā*) and that of action (*yoga*) are different.

In the verse we are discussing, the word 'unmanliness' says it all. Arjuna is asked by Krishna to be firm about the path he has chosen—*pravṛtti dharma*—and not shy away from his duty and momentarily get attached to *nivṛtti dharma*. That is unbecoming of Arjuna. It is weakness. One more thing: of the two royal ways of self-surrender and self-effort, Arjuna showed inclination towards neither. So Krishna asked him to shake off his momentary unmanliness and fight.

### IV. The Essence of Hinduism

A number of great scholars have said that the *Bhagavadgītā* consists of the essence of Hinduism. Sri Ramakrishna said that the *Gītā* is the essence of all the scriptures.<sup>15</sup> Now, the very name 'Hinduism' is bewildering: thousands of deities, hundreds of rituals and practices, tens of divisions—does the *Gītā* contain all these? Of course not. Yet, there is just one word which defines the whole of Hinduism: renunciation (*tyāga*). And the *Gītā* teaches it. The essence of Hinduism itself lies in renouncing our lower self and seeking the higher. Sri Ramakrishna re-established Hinduism. His whole life was one living instance of renunciation. We find the following idea repeated at least eight or nine times in the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*: 'What is the signifi-

12. See Śaṅkara's Introduction to *Īśa Upaniṣad-bhāṣya*.

13. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 6.8.7.

14. *dvividho hi vedokto dharmah, pravṛtti lakṣaṇo nivṛtti lakṣaṇasca jagataḥ stithikāraṇam*. Śaṅkara in his *Gītā-bhāṣya*.

15. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1985), p. 772.



cance of the *Gītā*? It is what you find by repeating the word ten times. It is then reversed into *tāgi*, which means a person who has renounced everything for God.<sup>16</sup>

The entire thrust of the verse under deliberation is on this one word: *tyaktvā*, 'having renounced'. Arjuna is asked by Krishna to renounce weakness. It is weakness alone that leads us to delusion and attachment, consequently leading us away from God. Giving up faintheartedness and working selflessly will lead us to the lotus feet of God and that is precisely the aim of Hinduism—to realize God.

### V. The Essence of Universal Religion

We now come to the final and most important idea that the *Gītā* (and our verse) contains: the essence of universal religion. What is this universal religion? In his remarkable lecture titled 'The Ideal of a Universal Religion' delivered in Pasadena, USA, on 22 January 1900, Swami Vivekananda analyses all earlier attempts to unify religions, brilliantly shows their flaws, and gives original hints about how religions can be harmonized. He gives two very simple ideas for the creation of a universal religion: (a) 'do not destroy', and (b) 'help'.<sup>17</sup> Swamiji discusses at length the philosophical, mythological and ritualistic differences of various religions, and says that human beings can be divided into four broad classes: the worker (*karma yogi*), the emotional person (*bhakti yogi*), the mystic (*rāja yogi*) and the philosopher (*jñāna yogi*).<sup>18</sup> The *Bhagavadgītā* is undoubtedly the best exposition of the universal religion. It 'does not destroy' but 'helps'. It helps a very ordinary seeker (*ārta* or *arthārthī*), who worships various smaller deities with leaves, flowers and fruits (*patram, puṣpam, phalam*)<sup>19</sup> by assuring that even such a devotee indeed worships the supreme Being. From such an ordinary seeker

to the seeker of supreme Knowledge, all have been shown the way to give up weakness and arise, in this great scripture.

Now, does the verse we are discussing contain the ideal of the universal religion? Oh, yes, it does! We have already seen how the verse contains elements of the teachings of the four yogas. So far as the fundamental principles of universal religion—'do not destroy' and 'help'—are concerned, we see that that is what Krishna does: having pointed out to Arjuna that he has succumbed to weakness and faintheartedness, Krishna asks him to arise. The rest will be taken care of by the Lord. Krishna did not 'destroy' or condemn Arjuna, but helped him by giving such instructions as have become immortal.

Such, then, is the glory of the verse. In conclusion, one wonders if most of the *Gītā* verses are like holograms—a single verse when studied, containing the entire *Gītā* in it!



**NEW FEATURE  
FROM  
NEXT MONTH!**



**Stories  
That  
Inspire**



16. Ibid., p. 104.

17. *Complete Works*, Vol. 2, p. 381.

18. Ibid., p. 386.

19. *Gītā*, 9.26.

# ***IMAGES OF INDIA'S PAST***

## **Is it a Coincidence?**

Delhi (and thereby India) was captured by the invaders in 1193, and the 'capital of Hinduism', Varanasi, fell in 1194. Swami Vivekananda declared the ideal of religious harmony at the religious parliament at Chicago in 1893—precisely 800 years after this event!

## **International Relations**

India had commercial relations with several countries like Greece, Rome, Sumer, etc. before our common era. Aelian, who lived in Greece in the 2nd century, wrote about a number of Indian animals. H.G. Rawlinson wrote: 'Aristoxenus, the musician, tells the following story about the Indians. One of these men met Socrates at Athens and asked him what was the scope of his philosophy. "An enquiry into human phenomenon," replied Socrates. At this the Indian burst out laughing, "How can a man enquire into human phenomena," he exclaimed, "when he is ignorant of the divine ones?"'

## **Ashoka's Pillars**

'The polish of Ashoka's pillars is the despair of modern craftsmen,' says a famous historian. Made between c. 273-236 BCE, when Ashoka ruled, these pillars have withstood the effects of time so well that English travellers like Tom Coryate and Whittaker were very sure that these pillars were made of brass. Actually, however, they are made of stone. These stones were more than 30 feet long and weighed over 50 tons. The monolithic shafts were brought out of the quarries of Chunar hills, chiselled and polished at the workshops of Pataliputra, and transferred to a place like Meerut, over 500 or 600 miles away. Sir John Marshall says, '[The pillars] are masterpieces of both style and technique, examples of the finest carving.'

## **A Surprise!**

Perhaps there is no other instance where the Lord's sandals ruled a nation for 14 long years: it was only at Bharata's Ayodhya.

**\*\*\*\*\***



# Just Like Any Other Book?

DR. GWILYM BECKERLEGGE

*Dr. Beckerlegge is a member of the Department of Religious Studies, The Open University, United Kingdom. The need of a proper orientation and reverence while studying a religious text, is the theme of this beautiful article.*

One of the most enduring aspects of Swami Vivekananda's teaching has been his vision of a universal religion. It has proved to be the most compelling aspect of the message now associated with the names of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda for western disciples, especially for those who have come to associate institutionalised Christianity with a narrow and exclusive parochialism. A hundred years since the birth of the Ramakrishna Movement, although the historical religions continue to run their separate courses, there have been signs of an increasing willingness on the part of many individuals to look more sensitively and seriously at the teachings of different religious traditions.

In certain respects, the modern Hindu tradition set the example in attempting to draw upon the wisdom of other traditions. Rammohun Roy took a searching look at the sources of Christian belief and entered into theological debate with Christians of his day. Like several other prominent Brahmos of his day, Rammohun Roy was drawn to the ethical teaching of Christianity. Within his sadhana, Sri Ramakrishna reached out to the experience and symbols of a number of traditions other than Hinduism, and so encouraged Vivekananda to formulate a Vedantic theory that acknowledges the insights of a range of religions. Mahatma Gandhi similarly affirmed that no religion holds a monopoly of truth. The spiritual journeys of Hindu teachers such as these have found more recent parallels in the ways in which individuals in the West have turned to Hindu and Buddhist sources of spiritual wisdom, to Chinese clas-

sics like the *Tao te Ching* and to the teachings of the Muslim Sufis, the sacred books of not just one tradition but of the world.

In today's 'globalised' world community, it is possible to download religious texts from the Internet. But, what of the status of these works as *sacred* books in the process? Of course, the word 'sacred' has particular, and specifically Christian, connotations in the English-speaking world. We can avoid submerging ourselves in lengthy discussion of the term 'sacred', however, if we reflect simply on the way in which religious communities around the world and down through time have sensed that certain books have to be treated differently from other books. In some religious traditions, this has meant insisting that the 'book' cannot be adequately translated. In others, it has meant handling and preserving the 'book' in a certain way, and in others insisting that its transmission be entrusted to a special class or shared with only some members of society. The publication of the monumental *Sacred Books of the East* series in the 1870s, today's international publishing industry, and now the Internet, have effectively undermined such restrictions on access. For the first time, sacred books have been made readily accessible to a potential global readership. If this change had not taken place, we could not be engaged upon our present discussion, and nor would so many people have found it possible to put into practice the ideal of learning from the religious insights of humankind, rather than operating within the narrow constraints of either accepting or rejecting their own re-



ceived religious tradition.

Yet, studying sacred books, or religious scriptures, makes its own demands, and it is worth pausing to reflect on the outcome of a process that now presents the Bible, the Koran, or the Vedas to the reader just like any other book. What we treat today as 'sacred books' are in many cases the later written records of earlier oral traditions that were *heard* or *chanted*, possibly because the recitation of scriptures fell to a body of specialists, or because ordinary devotees did not know the language in which the texts were written or non-literate. The act of transforming remembered and recited sacred words into a text has often been resisted. This transformation has had profound and lasting effects on the presentation of the teaching in the text, and on the way in which both the individual and the community gain access to the teaching. It was the first stage in the process that was to culminate in the indiscriminate, global availability of sacred books. There is, moreover, a finality to a book lent by its containment within covers. For scholars and critics, words on a manuscript leave deep footprints to be examined for signs of change and inconsistency, and, as texts, sacred books have encouraged a preoccupation with textual detail that is very different from the preoccupation of devotees.

Today, we do not simply have unprecedented access to the world's sacred books—we have also come to read them differently. 'Just like any other book', in fact, has been something of a slogan used to represent a position adopted by the liberal Christian contributors to *Essays and Reviews*—the controversial collection of essays, largely by Anglican clerics, that attempted to bring together Christian belief and modern, critical thought in the mid-19th century. Central to the bitter debate that these essays provoked was the question of how the Bible should be read and whether it was right to apply the same kind of critical questioning to the text of the Bible as to any other ancient book perme-

ated by appeals to the supernatural. Certainly, for rationalistic critics of Christianity, it seemed unreasonable that Christians would exempt biblical anthropomorphism and narratives of miraculous events from the same kind of sceptical review that such accounts would undoubtedly have received, if found in the sacred book of any other religion. Many liberal Christians of that period held a similar view, although they remained confident that upholding Christian faith could be reconciled with the fruits of honest intellectual inquiry. They sought to sift out the substance of timeless revelation through an analytical sieve whose holes were categories such as 'faith', 'history', 'myth', and other forms of symbolic language. In keeping with this approach, which was largely refined through the critical study of the Christian Bible, many of the scholars responsible for translating the sacred books of other religions applied these same principles when they handled these texts, as have subsequent generations of scholars. Many of us today add their translations, or the easy-to-read selections culled from them, to our own libraries and read them—just like any other book. It might seem, therefore, that the greater access that we now enjoy to those sacred books, often so jealously guarded in the past by their adherents, has come at a price; the loss of the sense of that special quality, their sacredness, that sets them apart from 'just any other book'.

Yet, if human beings are ever to learn from each other's spiritual insights, let alone move towards a point where a far greater proportion of human beings can come together and acknowledge common truths, the study of sacred books will continue to remain central to this endeavour. This may sound contrary to the insight that Sri Ramakrishna gained from his own sadhana. He, we are told, did not claim to have experienced the underlying truths of Christianity and Islam through an exhaustive study of their sacred books, but rather by direct experience and the practice of aspects of the devotional lifestyle



of Christians and Muslims. It should be remembered, however, that Sri Ramakrishna's encounter with Christianity and Islam occurred relatively late in the progression of his sadhana and also that he drew upon faiths represented on his own doorstep.

In today's world, it is more rather than less likely that many who are interested in expanding their religious horizons will look towards a global horizon because of the role played by the media, the opportunities to travel, and because, as this article has suggested, the world's sacred books are so relatively easy to acquire. For many individuals who wish to give serious consideration to the world's religions, whether as personal seekers or scholars, engaging with a sacred book, therefore, may be a practicable first step. Besides, this is to be expected because sacred books are often held within their own traditions to be authoritative repositories of spiritual insight. Also, for individuals who live far from the context within which a certain religion is practised, and consequently far from its recognised teachers, the sacred book is likely to provide the most immediate point of contact. For example, when Swami Vivekananda began to gather sympathizers in the West, many of his American devotees had already been exposed to Hindu thought through the influence of New England Transcendentalism, just as some admirers in Britain already knew something of the teaching of the *Bhagavadgita* or other Hindu texts then being circulated. A hundred years ago, those adventurous enough to explore religious traditions other than in close proximity had first to surmount the obstacle of how to discover more of them. Today, I would suggest, the problem is rather how to 'read' and understand what is so readily available to anybody who makes the effort to visit a bookshop or a website on the Internet.

A good example of the problems involved in trying to 'read' one of the world's sacred books is provided by the *Bhagavadgita*; arguably, the Indian sacred book that has

become most widely translated and known beyond the borders of its historical homeland. One scholar, in fact, has claimed that it has become an 'intracultural document' due to the number of times it has been translated and the variety of ways in which it has been put to use (Larson, 1975: 667). In the process, the meanings attached to it have changed according to the context within which it has been interpreted—something which Gandhi, for example, would have considered perfectly legitimate. Gandhi, however, did add a caveat to his approval of constantly renewing interpretations in that he saw this process as subservient to the need to preserve the essential truths of the scripture. And this raises a real problem. The transcultural assimilation of religious and philosophical ideas is significantly different from a technological or commercial exchange. These too have to take place in a congenial context, but religious and philosophical ideas are deeply imbedded in the traditions that have nourished them. There is a real danger of trivialisation that will become established once '...the terminology has accommodated itself to the needs of those who use it' (Mehta, 1980: 104).

Those individuals who still draw upon a sacred book from the standpoint of their professional faith will know how difficult it is to divorce their reading of it from their performance of religious ritual and the practical direction that flows from it into the conduct of their everyday lives. The risk of 'trivialisation' through dilution and generalisation are thus reduced. For them, at least, the responsibility for the meaning invested in the text remains largely with those who have been its historical guardians. The text does not simply provide a window overlooking a distant worldview nor is it reducible to a series of propositions for consideration.

This sounds like the point at which the devotee and the dispassionate scholar of religion part company, for while the scholar may understand more of how the sacred book came to take its present form, many scholars



today would argue that the study of a religion must proceed independently of its practice. What of those individuals, those whom we have called 'professional seekers', who have engaged upon an individual religious quest to discover whether truths, possibly common truths, may be found in many religions? Unless such people feel able to take up the lifestyle that flows from the personal acceptance of a sacred book, it may seem that they too are consigned to being just mere readers. The gap between devotee, scholar and personal seeker at this point, however, may not be as wide as it first appears, for even devotees often have a less than comprehensive, and even a partial, view of what their own tradition holds out to them. There are points in everyday life when the acceptance of some new truth or possibility is tentative. This may have been so at some point in the devotee's journey into faith, and it will most certainly be so on a number of occasions for the personal seeker determined to explore the possibilities held out by different religious traditions. This is where the insights of a religious teacher recognised within that religious tradition may offer a perspective that provides a doorway, framed by personal experience, through which devotees and personal seekers may pass from partial and tentative acceptance to a state of more comprehensive and unconditional acceptance. For scholars who as a matter of principle insist upon maintaining the independence of academic study from personal conviction, this doorway may provide at least some glimpse of what lies beyond. Motivated by the spirit of free critical inquiry, they may choose to look through the doorway but pass by. In so doing, they will still have gained an enriched insight into what the sacred book means for those able to commit themselves to it.

One such 'doorway' was Sri Ramakrishna who had quite a bit to say about the usefulness of studying sacred books, and not all of it was positive. In so much of his teaching, as with his encounter with Christianity

and Islam, he insisted 'Better than reading is hearing, better than hearing is seeing' (*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 476). He placed his reliance upon the primacy of direct experience rather than secondary, indirect experience. Ramakrishna was adamant that the study of 'thousands' of sacred books alone, especially through rote learning divorced from God-realization, was of little, if any, value (for example, *Gospel*, pp. 429, 625). On the other hand, he conceded the highest truth can be 'hinted at indirectly' in sacred books (*Gospel*, p. 482). Therefore, the seeker should hear scripture 'during the early stages of discipline' (*Gospel*, p. 200), but as part of a comprehensive religious discipline (*Gospel*, p. 524). Ramakrishna's recommendation was that sacred books should be studied under the guidance of a spiritual teacher, and not a 'glib' pundit (for example, *Gospel*, pp. 524, 543). Reading Sri Ramakrishna's teaching on this theme, however, opens up another possibility, and one that is also acknowledged beyond Hinduism, namely, that the spiritual seeker should reach a stage when sacred books are left far behind. Scripture becomes as 'a letter from home' to one who has absorbed its contents (*Gospel*, p. 694).

There is probably no literate religious tradition in the world that has not condemned those who read scriptures 'just like any other book' and who fail to practise the teachings of the sacred book. Not all religious traditions have been as confident as Ramakrishna that there will come a time when the disciple can put aside the sacred book, although probably all would be united in agreement that the sacred book ultimately has to be written on the heart, and not left on the printed page. The importance of looking at *how* a spiritual mentor of the stature of Ramakrishna might counsel using sacred books, however, is not based on the assumption that his views will necessarily tally in every respect with those of religious teachers the world over. As we have already seen, the human search for universal

(continued on page 618)



# Vedanta and Mathematical Logic

SWAMI ATMAPRIYANANDA

(continued from the previous issue)

## 2. Vedanta vis-a-vis Formalism

### 2.1. The Incompleteness v Inconsistency Question

We have seen how Godel's theorem is an assertion that truth cannot be caught in the net of formalism. A formal system constructed to catch truth in its net is a knowledge-framework, supposed to be internally consistent, which would hopefully be able to prove any statement that could be formulated within the system. The smashing of this hope by Godel means that this system is incapable of proving the *why* and *how* of any statement. The system that is a knowledge-framework thus has a component of inbuilt ignorance in the form of incompleteness. One could try to eliminate this ignorance and thus try to achieve completeness by sacrificing consistency, ie contradictions which would lead to Russell-type paradoxes that would inevitably crop up in the system, when it is enlarged to meet the demands of completeness. Thus ignorance reappears in a different form. The conclusion therefore is inescapable that knowledge must always be accompanied by ignorance. This duality, called *dvandva*, is one of the bedrocks upon which Vedantic epistemology rests. As Eddington put it beautifully:<sup>1</sup>

An addition to knowledge is won at the expense of an addition to ignorance. It is hard to empty the well of Truth with a leaky bucket.

The various systems of Vedanta, considered as attempts of the human intellect to

arrive at the ultimate truth of existence, must therefore be necessarily incomplete if they are carefully constructed to be free from internal inconsistency, insofar as they are formal systems built up to 'catch' truth in their net. One fundamental question which would show up the truth of this is discussed below.

### 2.2. Vedanta Understood in the Light of the Incomplete-Inconsistency Question

Vedanta is the science of that Reality by knowing which everything else becomes known. This Reality Vedanta designates as Brahman. This Brahman-knowledge (*brahma-vidyā*) should be obtained as Self-knowledge (*ātma-vidyā*). This is the acme or end of all knowledge (*Veda-anta*). The Vedantic texts, namely, the Upanishads, describe Brahman as Truth, Knowledge, Infinitude (*satyam, jñānam, anantam*). So far so good. But the one question that stares us squarely in the face is: Whereas Brahman is pure, immutable and infinite, the world of everyday perception (the inner as well as the outer world) is impure, mutable, a manifold of changing and fleeting phenomena and finite things; whereas Brahman is Bliss or Joy, this world is one of sorrow and endless agony. Now, how did the world arise from Brahman? Or in other words, how did the One become the many? How and why did the Unmanifest become manifest? Would not the blemishes of the world taint Brahman too, which manifests as the world?

#### 2.2.1. The Two Vedantic Positions: Advaitic v Dvaitic

This question is the rock on which all the Vedantic systems of thought have to dash.

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1. Arthur Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World* (Comet Books), p. 191.

Two extreme positions have been taken, one by the non-dualistic (Advaitic) system and the other by the dualistic (Dvaitic) system. All the other systems have taken positions which are variations of these extreme positions, in some form or other. In the extreme Advaitic position of Gaudapada, Brahman did never appear as the world, does never and will never do so (*ajātavāda*). In the less drastic Advaitic position of Sankara, the world is but an illusory manifestation of Brahman like the illusory appearance of a snake in a rope, and as such its limitations and defects do not affect Brahman in any way (*vivarta-vāda*). At the other extreme is the *actual transformation theory* (*pariṇāma-vāda*), where Brahman actually becomes this world, but the limitations etc of the world do not affect it *somehow*.

In the first case (Advaitic position), further questions arise: How does the infinite Brahman appear as the finite, transitory world? One then invokes a peculiar principle or power which effects this illusory manifestation, which superimposes (*adhyāsa*) the manifold of world-appearance on the supreme Brahman, in much the same way that semi-darkness is responsible for making a rope illusorily appear as a snake. This principle the Advaitin calls *Māyā*. Brahman and Maya should next be combined and the material cause of the world-manifestation sought. At least three different types of combination are envisaged, but then we need not enter into these details for the purpose of our discussion here. A series of questions then come up on Maya itself: What is its nature? How is it related to Brahman? What is its locus? What is its content? and so on. One more natural consequence of this invoking of the Maya-principle is the two-tier Reality to which one is inevitably led: (i) the *prima facie* reality of the world of diversity (*vyāvahārika sattā*), which, however, is ultimately to be denied, in asserting (ii) the ultimate Reality (*pāramārthika sattā*). An unmodified, attributeless Consciousness, which Brahman is, is

alone the ultimate Reality, while the world-appearance is only apparently real. Thus, apparently real and truly real are the two-tier realities to be reckoned with.

In the second case, on the other hand, a different set of questions would arise: If Brahman actually gets transformed into this world of diversity, how is it that the defects and the limitations of the latter do not in any way touch It, far less affect It? The answer by the Dvaitin would be *somehow*, which is the same as saying: 'I do not know.'

If the second position looks illogical or irrational, no less so is the first. Only the *somehow* issue has been pushed to Maya, whose nature is, well, who knows what, *anirvacanīya*; beginningless albeit with an end; indeterminable; neither real nor unreal nor both at the same time; neither partless nor endowed with parts nor both at the same time; something (*yatkiñcit*); of the nature of existence (*bhāva-rūpam*). Maya is thus described as the great wonder (*mahādbhuta*).

### 2.2.2. Understanding these Rival Theories in the Light of Godel's Theorem

Let us now try to understand these two positions of the two typical schools of Vedānta in the light of Godel's theorem and the completeness v consistency question. The fundamental question, namely, 'How did the infinite, immutable Brahman appear as the finite, mutable world of diversity and fleeting appearance?' was sought to be answered within the framework of each of these two systems. For the inability to answer this question would mean that these two systems suffer from the defect of incompleteness. The first position (that of the Advaitin), in trying to circumvent this problem of incompleteness, invoked a mysterious principle called Maya, that is nothing but invoking a principle of contradiction, which is what Maya's nature is. Thus inconsistency is injected into the system to save it from the disease of incomplete-



ness. On the other hand, the second position (that of the Dvaitin), without trying to overcome the same problem of incompleteness, simply asserted that the infinite, immutable Brahman actually got transformed (*pariṇāma*) into the finite, mutable world of diversity; but how? Well, *somehow*, which is another way of saying: Sorry, we do not know how. Thus, one is content to live with the problem of incompleteness.

To sum up: The Advaitin's system is content to accommodate inconsistency as tolerable, while the Dvaitin's system is willing to tolerate incompleteness as inevitable. That this two-horned dilemma is inbuilt in the very structure of our knowledge, of any formal system, that this choice between the Scylla of incompleteness and the Charybdis of inconsistency is the stuff which our intellectual efforts at grasping the truth is made of, is what Godel's theorem is all about. Thus it is that Godel has the last laugh!

### 2.2.3. Swami Vivekananda's Point of View

There is one other way to dismiss this problem of how the infinite Brahman became manifested as the finite world. That is to say that this question itself can *never* be logically formulated. Since the formulation of the question itself is not possible, and therefore the question itself is not born to be answered, the system is saved from the ignominy of both incompleteness and inconsistency: the price to pay, however, is silence! And this is the ultimate state of Vedantic wisdom: *upa-śānto'yaṁ ātmā*.

An interesting anecdote from Swami Vivekananda's life illustrates the truth of the last-mentioned escape route. We quote from his *Life*, as recorded by his Eastern and Western disciples:<sup>2</sup>

On 8 February 1897, a deputation came to

him—all Shaivaites, from Tirupattur to ask him questions about the fundamental points of the Advaita philosophy. The first question was—'How does the Unmanifested become the manifest?' The Swami replied that the question was illogical for *how* and *why* can be asked only of the relative and not of the Absolute and that he could answer questions only when they were put in a logical form.

Swami Vivekananda gave brilliant expositions on the doctrine of Maya, on the lines suggested above, in the course of his now famous *Jnana Yoga* lectures.<sup>3</sup> He looks upon our whole life as:

... a contradiction, a mixture of existence and non-existence. ... These tremendous contradictions in our intellect, in our knowledge, yea, in all the facts of our life face us on all sides. ... And this is Maya. These things go on, day and night, and to find a solution of this problem is impossible. Why should it be so? It is impossible to answer this, because the question cannot be logically formulated. There is neither *how* nor *why* in fact; we only know that it *is* and that we cannot help it. Even to grasp it, to draw an exact image of it in our own mind, is beyond our power. How can we solve it then? Maya is a statement of fact of this universe, of how it is going on.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Examples from High Energy Particle Physics

The search after the One in the midst of the many is the whole gist of the struggle, in philosophy as well as in science. In Physics, and more particularly in High Energy Particle Physics, for example, we always look for more and more generalization, unification, so that the diversity could be understood as just *manifestations* or *states* of the One. For exam-

2. His Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1965), pp. 473-74.

3. Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1994), Vol. 2, pp. 57-288.

4. Ibid., nn 91-94



ple, the question was asked whether the four fundamental forces of nature, namely, the strong, the weak, the electromagnetic and the gravitational, could be unified into a single force, of which these different forces could be considered manifestations. We have come quite far in this journey in search of this unification, although gravitation is still eluding us. Our faith in *symmetry* and that 'Nature loves symmetry' has led to some very profound discoveries in this century. Elementary particle symmetries are based on the belief that it is one particle which manifests as the many: The different particles are but the different states of the one. Supersymmetric schemes are being explored to see if all the various symmetries could be subsumed in one great symmetry. Unification theories are being pursued to their further and further limits and we now have the 'guts' to talk about Grand Unification Theories (GUTS). The search is expected to end with the discovery of the Theory of Everything!

Now the question is: if there is a grand symmetric scheme, why is it the various particles appear and behave differently? Why is it they have different properties? One answer is that it is because symmetry is broken. Example: the proton and the neutron have almost the same mass and therefore we could say there is one particle inside the nucleus, call it nucleon. The positive charge state of this nucleon is the proton; and the negative charge state of the same particle, nucleon, is the neutron. This symmetry, called the SU(2) symmetry, is slightly broken by the difference in mass. The next inevitable question is: why and how is it that this symmetry gets broken? Or the equivalent question in Advaita Vedanta: if there is one Absolute Indivisible Existence, why and how is it that It appears as the many? We have discussed elaborately how it is here that we need to reckon with the inherent limitation of our logical framework. Either we have to accept the fact that we really do not know how and why the One Absolute

Reality manifests as the many; but what we *do* know is that we see It manifesting diversely; thus the One Absolute seems to have the capacity to *somehow* appear as the many. Or, we could invoke a principle which we may call Maya, and say that the One Absolute, on account of Maya, appears as the many. Further questions will then arise: What is Maya? What is its nature? What its locus? and so on. The answer will be that we do not really know what Maya is or what its nature is or what its locus is. But what we do know is that it *somehow* makes the One Absolute appear as the many. Thus, the *somehow* still remains, but it is pushed to a different position in our logical framework. There is an inherent contradiction, an inexplicability somewhere in our philosophical framework, which will not allow us to satisfactorily answer the questions of how and why. However much we may try to establish that the structure of our philosophical framework should be complete in that it should be able to explain and decide the truth or otherwise of statements made in its respect, we see that we cannot do this unless we grant an inbuilt inconsistency in the system. If, like Hilbert did, we bypass this inconsistency, then the price to pay is that there could be and would be statements which are neither provable nor unprovable, that is, the truth of these statements would forever remain undecidable in the system. Vedantins have thus described Maya with the help of such 'undecidability' characteristics, as *yatkiñcit* (it is *something*), *mahādbhuta* (it is a great wonder), *anirvacanīyārūpā* (its nature is one of *undecidability*). Students of Vedanta sometimes get deluded into thinking that Maya is thus explained or defined. But just the contrary: Maya is thus not only not explained or defined, but is simply shown to be inexplicable or indefinable. It was pointed out earlier how Swami Vivekananda showed that this inexplicability or indefinability of Maya arises from the impossibility of logically being able to formulate the very question of why or how the One Abso-



lute became the many. Swamiji therefore said:

Thus we find that Maya is not a theory for the explanation of the world: it is simply a statement of facts as they exist, that the very basis of our being is contradiction, that everywhere we have to move through this tremendous contradiction. ... Thus the Vedanta philosophy is neither optimistic nor pessimistic.<sup>5</sup>

This peculiar state of human knowledge embracing a contradiction, is what he defined as Maya.

#### 4. Maya Understood in Terms of Russell's Paradox

Maya could also be understood in terms of Russell's paradox. We have noted that Maya is that principle or entity that *somehow* makes the One Absolute appear as many things, say, animals, plants, men, women, children and so on. Each of these—animals etc—forms a set. Now, none of these sets is a member of itself. For example, the set of animals is not another animal and therefore not a member of itself. Thus, Maya is a set of all sets which are not members of themselves. Following Simmons' terminology [see Section 1.1 of this article published last month], we may call Maya (M) a set of all normal sets. If M is a set of all normal sets, then Russell's paradox asserts, as mentioned earlier, that nothing can be asserted about the nature of M, because, the answer to the question: Is M itself a normal or an abnormal set? would lead to a self-contradiction. For, as has been shown before, if M is a normal set, it must be abnormal; and if M is an abnormal set, then it must be normal! It is a wonderful kind of set (*mahādbhuta*), inexplicable and indescribable (*anirvacanīya-rūpā*):

*Sannāpyasannāpyubhayātmikā no  
bhinnāpyabhinnāpyubhayātmikā no,  
Saṅgāpyasaṅgāpyubhayātmikā no  
mahādbhutā-anirvacanīya rūpā.*<sup>6</sup>

#### 5. The Bearing of this Understanding on our Worldview

In terms of practical spiritual life, what new insight does this perception give us? Or, in other words, what new *weltanschauung* are we led to form in the light of this insight? It gives us two things. One, it makes us humble. It humbles our intellectual pride because our intellectual framework, our logical and philosophical temper oscillates precariously between Scylla and Charybdis: self-contradiction and inconsistency on the one hand, and incompleteness on the other. Two, it shows us that there is very little to choose between the different philosophical systems, as superior or inferior, in terms of understanding or intuiting Truth or Reality, because each of them is plagued by the same inherent deficiency; we could carefully shift the deficiency from one place to another by shifting our philosophical standpoint. It would be a matter of choice, predilection, or proclivity. Truth would still remain as elusive as ever. This worldview breeds sympathy, breadth of vision, 'tolerance as well as acceptance,' in the words of Swami Vivekananda. This then frees us from the terrible monsters of fanaticism and hatred.

Sri Ramakrishna would often sing:<sup>7</sup>

Who can really understand  
what Mother Kali is?

All the six systems of philosophy  
are powerless to reveal Her.

Another of his favourite songs was:<sup>8</sup>

O Mother, make me mad with Thy love,  
Of what avail are knowledge or logical  
reasoning?

What he said and sang in his homely, unsophisticated way, when translated into the language we have been using, would mean, then: 'O Mother, release me from the shackles

7. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1985) p. 106.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 399.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

6. Sankara, *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, 109.



of over-much logical reasoning. Blast my inclination towards logistic formalism.'

In terms of Godel's theorem we can now understand, in the light of the completeness v consistency question in mathematical formalism, why Sri Ramakrishna prayed in this way.

### *Concluding Comments:*

#### *Swami Vivekananda's Vision of Vedanta as the Future Religion of Humanity*

Swami Vivekananda envisioned Vedanta as the future religion of humanity because it is a blend of intellect and intuition, of the head and the heart. He calls it sublime poetry, for it is through poetry alone that inspiration comes. In his famous lecture, 'The Absolute and its Manifestation', he says:

In the old Upanishads, we find sublime poetry; their authors were poets. Plato says, inspiration comes to people through poetry, and it seems as if these ancient

Rishis, seers of Truth, were raised above humanity to show these truths through poetry. They never preached, nor philosophized, nor wrote. Music came out of their hearts. In Buddha we had the great universal heart and infinite patience, making religion practical and bringing it to everyone's door. In Shankaracharya we saw tremendous intellectual power, throwing the scorching light of reasoning upon everything. We want today that bright sun of intellectuality joined with the heart of Buddha, the wonderful infinite heart of love and mercy. This union will give us the highest philosophy. Science and religion will meet and shake hands. Poetry and philosophy will become friends. This will be the religion of the future, and if we can work it out, we may be sure that it will be for all times and peoples.<sup>9</sup> □

9. *Complete Works*, Vol. 2, p. 140.

## **Just Like Any Other Book?**

*(continued from page 612)*

religious truths is relatively new and disagreements, even profound disagreements, remain to be solved. To look at the opinions of such guides, even where universal agreement is lacking, nevertheless, is a powerful reminder of their insistence that sacred books are not 'just like any other book'. In this instance, Ramakrishna's assessment of the value of reliance upon sacred books, balanced by his concerns about over-reliance, is singularly apposite in an age when reading a sacred book can be so effortless. The possibilities, which are latent in Ramakrishna's assertion that there should come a point when the spiritual seeker has no further use of sacred books, challenge even the most assiduous reader.

There is much to be said for recognising positively that the insights of the devotee and the scholarly observer are distinctive. They may overlap and they may enrich each other,

and, when they differ, there may still be something to learn from both. In the matter of their 'reading' of sacred books, there is an important sense in which neither scholars nor personal seekers will be satisfied with treating these texts 'just like any other book'. Scholars may continue to maintain that they are competent to explore religions to which they are not committed and to ask questions of sacred books that at times may seem offensive, or at least insensitive, to devotees. Yet, it remains as of as much importance to scholars as it is to devotees not to lose sight of *how* sacred books have been and are being read within the religious traditions that have acted as their guardians, perhaps even more so when great teachers from some of these traditions speak of a time when, after God-realisation, 'books, scriptures and science appear as mere dust and straw' (*Gospel*, p. 646). □



# RELIGION AND LIFE



## Swami Bhuteshanandaji's Answers to Questions

*Maharaj, what is meant by Ūrjitā bhakti?*

*Ūrjitā bhakti* is intense devotion. If a devotee has such intense devotion, he laughs, cries, dances and sings in ecstasy. Sri Ramakrishna has quoted from the *Ādhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* about this love. He says that in the book, it is written that Lakshmana asked Rama: 'Rama, in how many forms and moods do you exist? How shall I be able to recognize you?' Rama said: 'Brother, remember this. You may be certain that I exist wherever you find manifestation of ecstatic love.' That love makes one laugh and weep and dance and sing. 'If anyone has developed such love, you may know for certain that God Himself is manifest there,' says Sri Ramakrishna. I remember a śloka of the *Bhāgavata* [11.14.20]:

*Na sādhayati mām yogo  
na sām̐khyam̐ dharma uddhava;  
Na svādhyāyastapas-tyāgo  
yathā bhaktirmamorjitā.*

In this verse, Sri Krishna tells Uddhava that he is not pleased with anything—yoga, karma, or philosophy—but intense devotion (*ūrjitā bhakti*). In the same place [*Bhāgavata*, 11.14.23] Krishna says again:

*Katham̐ vinā romaharṣam̐  
dravatā cetasā vinā;  
Vinānandāsrukalayā  
śuddhyed-bhaktyā vināśayah.*

Without such intense devotion, where there is horripilation, tears, etc, how can the person become pure? So, this is intense devotion or *ūrjitā bhakti*.

*How can we increase our devotion and love towards Him?*

You must make a conscious effort, and later on it all depends upon His grace. Systematic practice aids growth; lack of it dries up devotion.

*How to develop devotion?*

You grow in devotion by practising devotion. That is, mix with devotees, lead a pious life, repeat God's names and sing His glories—then you may develop love for God. Pray to Him constantly with all your mind and then alone does the mind become concentrated on Him. To sing His glories, to live in seclusion intermittently, to keep holy company, and to always think of God, these are the ways to enhance devotion. There is a beautiful verse in the *Bhāgavata* [11.11.34]:

*Mallīṅga-madbhaktajana-  
darśana-sparśanārcanam;  
Paricaryāstutiḥ prahva-  
guṇakarmānu-kīrtanam.*

It means that by seeing and worshipping God's images and His devotees, one grows in devotion to Him. There the *Bhāgavata* gives a long list of pious actions which help us grow in devotion to God.

*Maharaj, is there any difference between the outlook of a devotee and that of a person of knowledge (jñāni)?*

To a devotee, whatever he sees is beautiful; to the *jñāni* whatever he sees is Brahman. The river becomes the sea only after it merges with the sea and not before. As the waters of the Ganga after reaching the sea becomes the sea itself, similarly, human beings can also merge with God and become one with Him. When that happens, the individuality and

imperfections in human beings disappear completely.

He who is devoted to God, worships Him, sings His glories, and prays to Him, is a devotee. He who identifies himself with the supreme Reality—whom will he worship? He who is the controller of the sun's activities is also the controller of the earth's activities. *Īśvara* is controlling everything. The meaning of the word *īśvara* is, 'one who controls everything (*niyantā*)'. If the controller is not there, how will things go on? He is controlling everything and without His will nothing can happen.

*Does the state of doubt and argument end when we love God as our most beloved One?*

No, it is not the end; rather, it is the beginning. Through such doubt and despair, the devotee is progressively transformed into the very nature (*svabhāva*) of God.

*When does faith come to us?*

That comes much earlier (than the above-mentioned state)! Unless there is faith, the devotee will not be inclined to perform sadhana. Now, if after commencing sadhana, once the devotee progresses more and more along the devotional path, his faith also will grow stronger and stronger. Later, that very faith will lead him or her to the blissful experience of God.

*How can God be attained?*

God can be attained if you perform spiritual practices with intense yearning for Him. Further, according to Sri Ramakrishna, you should adhere to any one of the spiritual attitudes like *śānta*, *dāśya*, *sakhya*, *vātsalya* or *madhura*.

In the present age, God is also worshipped as Mother. However, to consider God as Mother has not been referred to everywhere in olden times; it is a recent and later idea. And one can say that the attitude of regarding God as Mother is a very effective

method of sadhana.

*Does one have to struggle a lot to attain God?*

Oh, yes, it has to be so! Had the path been rosy, everybody could reach Him. Because the path is a difficult one, not everyone can approach Him. Is it not difficult to get a job, or to work somewhere? Is everyone fortunate enough to get a good job? Tradition has it that in the Vishwanatha Temple at Benaras, one has to sit somewhere and perform japa after having seen and worshipped the deity. A few try for a short while, but they get up soon. What choice do they have? If they sit for a longer period with eyes closed, the bulls there will come and shove them off with their horns. So also, the very attraction for household activities will make one give up holy thoughts.

*Various thoughts crowd the mind during japa. What is the way out?*

You cannot stop your mind now from running astray; it goes on doing its job. Persistent effort and long practice, however, will certainly help. Remember this: '*Pratyāyānti gatāḥ punarna divasāḥ kālo jagad-bhakṣakaḥ*' [*Śivāparādha-kṣamāpaṇa-stotra* of *Śaṅkara*]. A day that has passed cannot be retrieved. Imagine how precious each day is. Just ask yourself, 'Days are passing by one after another. What have I achieved?' Utilize your time well....

*Who introduces human beings to God?*

There is no need of any introduction because He is within you. He is trying to direct your eyes towards your inner Self. People in this world are engrossed with various worldly problems and do not look inward. To make us look inward, one or two unique personalities come to this world and tell us, 'Look! See Him within you!'



# Story of an Inspiring Life

SWAMI TATHAGATANANDA

*The head of the Vedanta Society, New York, Swami Tathagatanandaji Maharaj, gives a valuable portrayal of Jeanne Genet—a great life, totally dedicated to a noble cause.*

The spiritual idealism, eternal wisdom, and hallowed example of the great luminaries—Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda—ever ignite the divine spark in sincere and noble aspiring souls, wherever they may be. The noble Genet family—Jeanne, Rolande, and their mother, Maman—living in the West, was one such example of supreme dedication and devotion to Vedanta.

The two sisters, Jeanne and Rolande, were born in Ottawa, a year apart, in a well-to-do French Canadian family, in 1906 and 1907, respectively. A good government position held by the father kept the family prosperous and comfortable. As was customary at that time, the two sisters boarded in a Catholic convent school and immediately felt a pronounced love and admiration for the convent life. By nature, Jeanne was introspective, reserved, silent, and Rolande jolly, self-reliant, fearless, and zealous. Both were cherished by the nuns, who deemed them perfect for the contemplative, self-sacrificing convent life. Their father passed away while they were still young, and their mother, Maman, apprehensive of the influence of the convent nuns upon her daughters, removed them from that school, moved to Montreal, and had them privately tutored. In 1932, at the age of fifty, Maman moved the family to New York, for better career opportunities.

Gifted in piano and violin, Jeanne pursued a musical vocation, while Rolande became an expert dancer. Despite Maman's progressive and well-informed intentions, Jeanne and Rolande were destined to lead ideal spiritual lives. Amidst glamour, their noble minds yearned for Truth. Rolande was

inexorably led to Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda when the book, *Prophets of New India*, by the French author Romain Rolland, came into her hands. Rolande and Jeanne were profoundly moved and inspired to discover for themselves the eternal soul of India, radiant, calm and majestic, with a 'unifying, pacifying love for all beings.' Steadily and securely they were transformed, and they wholly accepted the broad principles of Vedanta as exemplified in the hallowed lives of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

In 1933, Jeanne and Rolande came to the Vedanta Society of New York to hear their first lecture on Vedanta to be given by Swami Bodhananda, a disciple of Swami Vivekananda. Their acquaintance ripened into a soul-enriching friendship. The Swami (who had come to New York the same year as Jeanne's birth) became their spiritual father: their best friend, philosopher and guide. The girls joined the Swami's Sanskrit class. Every night before retiring, Jeanne would invariably write some sentences or words, as the time permitted, in Sanskrit script. Her handwriting was beautiful. They both took part in the Sanskrit dramas staged by Swami Bodhananda. After some years, when the Swami was passing through hard days, the family moved from East Side of Manhattan to West Side, to be nearer to the Society. They later moved to the same block as the Society itself, and with each move their luxury was reduced. The Genet family now began to show in great depth their nobility and motherliness. Rolande was the first to reveal that nature. Around 1949, for several months, she cooked and brought food to the ailing Swami;



then she came to live in the basement of the Society and cheerfully assumed responsibility for all his personal care and for the entire household. This revealed the first glimmer of her selfless dedication.

In 1950, Rolande had to accompany Swami Bodhananda to the hospital, where he passed away at age eighty. Rolande stayed on, feeling there was never enough she could do to show her eternal gratitude to the Source of the spiritual fulfilment she had found in Vedanta. In 1951 Swami Pavitrananda, a disciple of Swami Brahmananda, the first President of the Ramakrishna Order, was sent from India: he served as the spiritual leader until 1977, when he breathed his last. At his invitation, Maman and Jeanne would freely and fully serve the Society, and in order to support the family, Jeanne gave her piano away to charity and assumed a fulltime job as a receptionist in a large corporation. This was the first and only job she ever had. The experience proved invaluable for Jeanne, for later in 1957 she became Secretary of the Society, a post she devotedly and efficiently held to her last day. It may be remembered that the Genets always supported themselves and rendered free service to the Society.

### *Life in The Vedanta Society*

When Rolande came to live in the ground level of the Society, it was not at all a comfortable place to live in. Common toilets, distasteful floors, a camp cot for a bed, a primitive kitchen and rods hanging overhead were all very disappointing, if not frustrating. It seemed she had put her hands into a cluster of bees. Rolande's serene fortitude in the face of unpleasantness and chagrin, and her indomitable capacity to ignore them, speak volumes of her genuine devotion to her mentor and his work.

It may be borne in mind that the two sisters and their mother were used to a comfortable life. Around 1953, Jeanne and her mother came to live in the Society. In spite of tremendous hardship, they enjoyed their new

life. In due course, their exposure to idealism and their struggle for a spiritual life became highly rewarding. They lived simply but fully, enjoying contentment at heart. After the arrival of Swami Pavitrananda, the situation improved. Their life was a little better.

Maman was a very resourceful lady. She was an affectionate mother. She, in her advanced age, shared the privation and discomfort with dignity and grace. Most probably, she became a widow in her thirties. She did not remarry, she herself told Jeanne in later years, only for the sake of her daughters. With wide experience on two continents, she had come in contact with a variety of people. She became a grandmother to many friends of the Society. She was active till the end of her life.

An idea of the nature of the services freely given by the Genet family is given here. As housekeepers they had a vast range of meaningful duties. Answering doorbells on the ground and first floors alone kept them ever on their feet. They answered the telephone, received and entertained guests, kept the entire Society's premises meticulously clean and prepared for all events, shopped for food and prepared all the meals, sold books and did the accounting; they purchased, maintained and replenished all household supplies as well as the household's major equipment and machinery, renewed contracts for the general maintenance of the building, to name only a few.

Friends, especially workers, were always few and far between. Courtenaye and her husband, George Olden, came to the Society to hear the very first lecture of Swami Pavitrananda in 1951. Courtenaye from the beginning became acquainted with the Genet family, and in a short time this ripened into close friendship. The Genets' service to the cause of Vedanta touched her perceptive heart. She felt the dire necessity of giving them a little comfort by taking them out for shopping and fresh air in her car. George also was especially sympathetic with the Genets. But all three could not go at the same time, as



one would have to remain to keep house. Hence, the sisters would go out every alternate week.

In 1960, Rolande passed away at the Society on Good Friday with full consciousness. She was 53. Naturally, it was a great shock to Jeanne, but her nobility enabled her to meet the bereavement with courage. With broken heart she pursued her daily chores and comforted her mother in every possible way. She perhaps remembered the passage of Maeterlinck (1862-1949) that soothed and energized the depressed mind of Miss MacLeod after Swamiji's passing away: 'If you have been greatly influenced by anyone, prove it in your life, not by tears.'

In 1962, Jeanne took an early retirement to stay with her mother and render services to the Society. Maman, who was quite fit even at 95, passed away in May 1977. Jeanne was informed at night about her mother's death. She requested the hospital to make all arrangements for cremation and quietly spent the night in prayer, yearning mental security of a spiritual nature.

I came to the Society on 15 February 1977. I saw Maman Genet a few times but have lived with Jeanne all these years. She was free from the terribly weighted burden of ego that we all bear. She developed a mystic kinship with all. She merely lived. A gentle cheerfulness there was about her always, and a lurking sense of humour which made it possible to talk to her. Her warm personality and the intensity of her vision enabled her to work ceaselessly. She never complained. She never travelled, as she was tied with the work of the Society.

Once, at my earnest request and opportunity she boarded a plane for the first time. She was accompanied by her close friend, Mrs. Block. They flew from New York to Boston to attend the Krishna festival at Marshfield. After spending some time there, they returned to New York. Another time, both of them flew to Washington, D.C., and spent a few days there. That was all.

From 1933, Jeanne had been attending the chapel services regularly. In spite of that she never felt bored or disinterested. Once, on 7 March 1995, Jeanne had to go to the hospital for an entire day to undergo cataract surgery. She arrived early in the morning, patiently waited several hours for her surgery to be performed, underwent the surgery, had a poor and meagre hospital lunch, and after the required post-operative observation, returned to the Society at 8 in the evening, after twelve hours in the hospital, just in time for the evening discourse. She never attended to her understandably personal needs, but went straight to class—on time. Some years before, on a Friday night, again a class night, she had to go to the hospital. She took with her the *Svetasvatara Upanishad* that was to be expounded in the class and read the entire Upanishad before going to sleep. Such was her dedication, devotion and love for the class. Such devotion furnishes a luminous commentary on her character.

#### *Miss Jeanne Genet As I Understand Her*

Miss Genet passed away on 28 August 1998. She was almost 93. She lived and worked in the Society premises for almost half a century. What a saintly life she lived! Her value should not be measured by the years she has lived or by the work she has done. Her value can be partially estimated by the spiritual attitude behind her life and work. What a magnificent epic of devotion to Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji we saw in her life!

Her entire life, as it appeared to me, was one of humility, self-effacement and an ungrudging labour of love. She led a very balanced life, and was never impulsive. Behind her gentle nature, suavity, loving service and genial personality there was a steel frame of discipline and steadfast loyalty. She had never lived an embittered, immolated, resentful and self-pitying life. On the contrary, she was consciously and intelligently committed to the philosophy of work as spelled out by



Swamiji. She committed her life in unreserved obedience to him. It is conspicuously different from the mild, conventional religious life known to us all. She lived an amazingly simple life with a singleness of purpose. In twenty years of my life I never saw even one occasion when she raised her voice, lost her temper, or gave expression to her reaction through her facial gestures. I never saw in her the least stress of depression. The rich grain of wisdom that can be garnered from her life may be told in simple words: She lived for God. Jeanne, I think, achieved a high degree of joyful self-renunciation. The crux of spiritual living lies in our capacity to surrender—a relentless, inexorable divine standard. Her prayerful inner life, silent communion with Sri Ramakrishna and intense longing to beseech his grace profoundly and gradually changed her mind. Her serenity, her facial and bodily repose, her sweetness of character and her unassuming nature are all an outcome of her worshipping spirit. Due to her spiritual maturity and absolute dependence on God, I believe, she achieved a rare harmony between her mind and spirit. That gave her frail body, shortened stature and stooped head a spiritual luminosity and unshakeable vitality. She commanded respect from one and all. Such a deep conviction in God's acceptance of our selfless work is the most valuable asset in prosperity, a safe refuge in adversity, and abiding joy in old age. Our world is mysterious and vast but illusory. We are but tiny specks on this changing planet. But our creative mind, our integrity of character, our good will and unselfishness will never be lost. Her shining character is a real force, as real as heat or light, and therefore, her genuine love for God and man, her breadth of vision, her self-immolation at the altar of idealism will certainly survive. The force of character is indestructible. We all know she was exposed to the life-giving message of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda when she was just 26, in 1932. From that time they became the cry of her life, the song of her soul. Ramakrishna-

Vivekananda lit a beacon of hope for her. She took firm determination and firm resolve to follow the idealism of these twin stars in the firmament of modern life.

How is it possible for a young girl of alien culture to be deeply interested in their teachings? I believe it was destiny. She was possessed by them for their work. She did commendable service to the cause of Vedanta. She looked upon the building of the Society as the body of Swamiji—she said this many a time to me. Sri Ramakrishna's message—'There are as many paths to the Divine as there are points of view'—cast a deep spell on her pure mind. And Swamiji's message—'Whoever gives up this life for His sake, finds the life immortal'—gave her conviction, courage, fortitude, steadfastness, strength to endure and patience to wait. Jeanne fully understood the significance of Swamiji's message of 'renunciation and sacrifice.' I lived with her all these twenty years. Now that she is no more physically with us, I think of her noble and beautiful life. What can be the secret of her sweet disposition, serenity and peace? I have seen her day in and day out, her untiring patience, endless work, wonderful detachment, contentment and joy. She must have had some spiritual experience that transformed her entire outlook, widened her horizon, enlarged her vision, and endowed her with power to translate her aspiration into action.

Meditation is the real key of sustained peace. Meditation is nothing but continuous communion with the Divine. Deep, sincere, and sustained meditation can transform the base metal of human life into the pure gold of virile divine wisdom. Real meditation is the flame which keeps the lamp of daily living burning, as intensely as we orient our mind in the thought of God. Meditation is like a boat for crossing the river of life—a river frightfully agitated with emotional storms and egoistic conflicts.

Goodness inspires, brilliance attracts,

*(continued on page 628)*



# Temples and Churches

## A WESTERN PILGRIM

*A western pilgrim narrates his Indian experience and gives his ideas about temples and churches.*

I was born as a Christian in a European country. After my studies were over, I somehow got more and more attracted towards the Indian culture. I had the good luck to visit India a few times and along with it, many temples. I also could witness a different way of how religion can be practised. The following lines give a short description of a few impressions I gathered throughout my journey. I also try to point out some differences between Hindu temples and their activities, and the European (mainly Catholic) church. I am fully aware that my observations are not absolute and I believe that in course of time, I may have to revise a few of my conclusions again.

According to the dictionary, the word temple is derived from Latin and stands for a sacred and ceremonial place. It is usually dedicated to one or more divinities. Hearing about temples, we mostly link it with Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Indian, Chinese, Japanese or Pre-Columbian culture. The term church is more restrictive. It pertains to the Christian religion, either to the building used for a sacred purpose or to a Christian religious group. However, the building of temples and churches serves the same purpose. It is a place where people meet to hear about their ideal and where they go for prayers, worship and celebrations.

Between temples and churches, there are many differences with respect to the physical appearance and also to religious practice. Considering the cultural difference of the society, the climate, the mythology and the descent of the different avatars, it would be surprising if there were none. The house of

God has to fulfil different requirements of the devotees with respect to rituals and celebrations.

Temples can be very vast and complex compared to churches. I found that most of the temples are usually surrounded by a big wall with one main entry and (sometimes) three subsidiary gates, opening into the four cardinal directions. Gates are very often adorned with big *gopurams*, sometimes beautifully adorned with relief sculpture representing episodes of many mythological stories. Within the premises of a big temple, there may be many small temples or shrines for the minor deities connected to the main deity. Furthermore, one can find a big water tank, resting places, kitchen, a hall for congregational religious acts and other places. The most important part of a temple is the *sacrum sanctorum*, where the image of the deity is stationed. This sanctuary is at some distance from the place where the devotees are allowed to have their *darshan* and is usually kept dark, except for a few oil lights.

A church is less heterogeneous compared to the temple. In Christianity, the public Mass is an important celebration. As the Mass is a celebration which is generally practised in a community, a hall is required to accommodate all the devotees of the locality who would like to participate in the ceremony. Therefore a church usually consists of a big hall, running from a centred doorway to the altar at the other end of the building. The main part of the hall is furnished with benches for the devotees. Big churches may contain subsidiary chapels, rooms for baptism, treasures and relics and a few places for



other purposes. Specially Catholic churches may be very rich in decorations, such as paintings, sculptures, mosaics, and stained glasses. This is usually within one building. The exterior part of the church is open to its surrounding and is freely accessible to the public.

Worship and practices differ quite a bit in Hindu and Christian culture. In temples there is a continuous coming and going of the devotees. It is more an individual approach to God. The main purpose of visiting a temple is to have the *darshan* of the deity. Making some offerings and receiving some *prasad* is another important part of the temple visit. Specially in big temples, there are many possibilities to get individual worship done by the temple priests.

As already mentioned above, an important part of the Christian celebration is the Mass. Before the Mass starts, big bells ring from the church tower for a few minutes (in Hindu temples, it is the devotee who announces his entering the temple by ringing the bell once). They easily reach the houses of the locality, as a reminder and serve as an invitation to participate in the celebration. The Mass consists basically of chants, readings, prayers, sermon, Eucharist and other ceremonies. It is mainly during this time that the church is filled with the faithful. Mass is usually celebrated every Sunday, on some weekdays and on a few major festivals during the year. It is also the essential element of the service at marriages, funerals and other observances. At other times (when there is no Mass) the church is nearly empty and is a very quiet place, ideal for the seeker to contemplate on God. This doesn't include churches of tourist attraction.

Unlike the Christian church which is financially supported by the community through a tax system, Hindu temples have to be largely self-dependent. The income of a priest may partially depend on the devotees. In some temples, unfortunately, some priests see the devotee more as a source of money than as a worshipper of God. This does not

make it very easy for the devotee to maintain a spiritual attitude. As a foreigner and an ignorant visitor of temples, many times I became a potential donor in the eyes of temple guides and priests. This was specially during my first visits, when I went on my own. Later on, when I was a little more 'experienced', I got used to the situation and did not bother too much about it any more. Entering a temple in the company of an Indian devotee or a monk, hardly any troubles were encountered. The reason for this kind of problems may be that temple priests have inherited their profession and they look at their profession as a means of income to maintain their families. Foreigners represent a good source for their livelihood. I must say that in some places, although visiting the temple on my own, I was pleasantly welcomed by the priest in charge.

However, the atmosphere in a frequented temple is very special. I was very impressed by the kind of devotion with which many people approached God. This is something which is not easily seen in the West. Hindu devotees seem to have a much closer contact with God than the Christian devotee. One of the many reasons may be the practice of the personal worship of God by the devotee. This is somewhat missing in the large part of the Christian society. In most of the Indian families, a little shrine will be found where the family deity is installed and a little worship is practised every day. This practice, which enables the devotee to establish a close and personal contact with God is not known in most of the Christian families. Although we may find holy pictures and symbols, no real worship is carried out. In India, even in offices I have seen small shrines with God (mainly Ganesha) as the protector to ensure the well-being of business. It showed me how religion and a strong faith are connected with mundane life.

Pilgrimages are characteristic of many religions. Nearly all countries have some holy places which pilgrims visit. Compared to the



West, pilgrimage has a much more important place in Hinduism. I could witness various practices Hindu devotees go through in order to purify their minds or to achieve some personal benefits. This could be a simple ritual or hard physical *tapasya*. There were many practices which left a deep impression on my mind. Below, I would like to mention a few of them: On Shivaratri day, masses of people will circumambulate the holy mountain Arunachala in Tiruvannamalai, visiting all the temples, shrines and *ashramas* on their way; for performing *abhisheka* on Shivaratri day, groups of people undertake a long march (sometimes several days) as a ritual, to get holy water from River Ganga in Hardwar; the circumambulation of holy places by walking is a known practice. What impressed me most in this respect was the '*dandavat-parikrama*'. When I saw it first in a temple, I was quite impressed, but when I saw later that this can be extended around a whole mountain (Govardhan, 25 km) over a period of one month, indifferent to the changes of the weather, I was spellbound; many temples are located on hilltops and devotees carry their offering up the hill while singing the name of the adored deity, either alone or in chorus.

All these show that there is a lot of fervour in the heart of the practising devotee. It is this fervour which is so important and has unfortunately become quite rare in the West. I believe that it is a lost treasure and, to find it again, we may have to learn from those who still have it.

Usually I did not face any problems entering a Hindu temple. In some cases, although indicated by a sign 'No Access for Non-Hindus', the temple authorities gave permission after showing a letter of recommendation from a well-known religious institution. I have also heard that some temple authorities are very strict in this respect and keep the rules firmly. I learned from a monk that this was not always the case and that this rule was introduced as a protection for the temple in question. It was the result of the

destruction caused by the invaders of India. A church is basically accessible for everybody. The only objection may be loose clothing. So at the entrance of a church, a board may be found as a reminder for proper clothing. In rare cases of important churches like the Peter's dome in Rome, gatekeepers will keep a sharp eye on the visitors' dress.

I found that Ramakrishna temples or shrines provide an ideal combination for the devotee to practise religion in his desired way. It is the simple form of a big hall which invites the devotee for a common celebration of the daily *arati* and chanting. It is the daily worship of the image which indicates and evokes the presence of God in the heart of the devotee and it is the quiet and peaceful surrounding at times when there is no service which invites for contemplation. In addition, *pujas* and celebrations are carried out by sadhus and brahmacharins which contribute to the holy atmosphere of the place.

Spiritual authorities speak about another temple which is of a more subtle form and is far more important than the one visible to our eyes. Sri Ramakrishna told some Brahmoo devotees: 'You should first cleanse the shrine of your heart, then you should install the deity and arrange worship.' (*Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 159) and: 'But you should remember that the heart of the devotee is the abode of God. He dwells, no doubt, in all beings, but He especially manifests Himself in the heart of the devotee. A landlord may at one time or another visit all parts of his estate, but people say he is generally to be found in a particular drawing-room. The heart of the devotee is the drawing room of God.' (*Gospel*, p. 133.)

We can find a similar passage in the Bible. Jesus said (*I Corinthians*): 'Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the spirit of God dwells within you?' (3.16); and: 'Know that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is within you, which you have from God and you are not your own.' (6.19)



We can also find a beautiful description about the non-dualistic approach to Self-realization in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (Section 8, Chapter 1): 'Within the city of Brahman, which is the body, there is a mansion, our heart. It has the shape of a small lotus and within that lotus there is a small inner space (*akasha*). What exists within that small *akasha*, that is to be sought after, that is what one should desire to understand. Even as large as is the universe outside, is the universe within

this *akasha*. Within it are heaven and earth, fire and air, sun and moon, lightning and stars. Whatever belongs to us in this world and also whatever does not—all that is contained within. With the old age of the body, it does not age, with the death of the body, it does not die. In it, all desires are contained. It is the Self, untouched by any deed, ageless, deathless, free from grief, free from hunger and thirst. In It are contained all desires. This is the real city of Brahman.' □

## Story of an Inspiring Life

(continued from page 624)

beauty fascinates, glamour breeds envy, power alienates, scholarship charms, but a truly peaceful loving life conquers us and encompasses us. Jeanne's peaceful and loving nature can give perspective and understanding to troubled, uncertain and perplexed people. In any society, such a person is a living rebuke to our lives of restlessness.

No wonder most of us addressed her as 'Mother Jeanne,' as we found in her the manifestation of motherhood which, of course, is divine in nature. The word 'Mother' is ex-

tremely suggestive of our intimate relationship. It stems from our most loving experience and has an aura of meaning.

People are like green grass that grows everywhere. Some special flowers are found in certain areas only. Jeanne, to my mind, was such a special flower.

*'It is long since the cedar has fallen, but its fragrance endures, and will forever seek the four corners of the earth.'*

### Zen Master Dogen-zenji Teaches...

We must remember the four kinds of communions between all creatures and Bodhisattvas or Buddhas: 1. A good deed done in the past is rewarded to us unnoticed; 2. A good deed done in the past is rewarded to us noticed; 3. A good deed done at present is rewarded to us noticed; and 4. A good deed done at present is rewarded to us unnoticed. At the same time there are three kinds of periods when good and evil deeds are rewarded to us; deeds done at present are rewarded in this, the next, or in the third existences. These things we must carefully study. ... Nowadays most people expect to have their good deeds known to others, while they are afraid of having their bad deeds found out. So there is a gap between mind and appearance. They should, however, strenuously try to put this gap to naught, repenting of wrong deeds, concealing their own true virtue ... but ascribing good deeds to others and wrong ones to themselves.

—adapted from *The First Step to Dogen's Zen*



# Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad

SWAMI SRIDHARANANDA

(continued from the previous issue)

संप्राप्यैनमृषयो ज्ञानतृप्ताः

कृतात्मनो वीतरागाः प्रशान्ताः।

ते सर्वगं सर्वतः प्राप्य धीरा

युक्तात्मानः सर्वमेवाविशन्ति॥५॥

*Samprāpyainam-ṛṣayo jñāna-trptāḥ*

*kṛtātmāno vītarāgāḥ praśāntāḥ;*

*Te sarvagam sarvataḥ prāpya dhīrā*

*yuktātmānaḥ sarvam-evāviśanti. (III.ii.5)*

Having attained This, the seers become satisfied with their knowledge. They are perfected souls, freed from passion and attachment, and tranquil (composed). Having attained the all-pervasive, omnipresent One, these wise, discriminative, devout souls, ever merged in contemplation, enter into the All.

What happens to a person who realizes the Atman? The *lakṣaṇas* or signs and symptoms of a *jīvanmukta* are enunciated with a twofold intention. First, to enable the *sādhaka* to convince himself that he has reached the goal and is not deceiving himself, that he has known what is to be known and tasted the fruits of *jīvanmukti*. Second, for others to recognize the *jīvanmukta*, they must have the power of correct assessment to know if a person is a *brahmajñāni* and not a hypocrite, exploiting their credulity; similarly, one must know oneself to be truly such.

The term *samprāpya* is used. *Samyak prāpyatā* means that the experience is totally free from all delusions—a doubtless experience. A *sādhaka* goes through various phases of experience, till in the ultimate experience he loses his consciousness in the Absolute and merges his ego in It. After coming back to his normal consciousness, he is ecstatic, but

whether he has had *samyak* or *asamyak prāpyatā* of the goal remains to be decided. A monk experienced unbelievable bliss in meditation. He was so joyous that he told Swami Premanandaji that he had reached the goal. Swami Premananda asked him, 'Are you sure?' On being asked for the third time, a doubt regarding his experience arose in the monk's mind. Then Swami Premananda said that in that experience there would be no doubt. Doubtless knowledge is *samyak prāpta jñāna*. Swami Jagadananda [the translator of *Sri Ramakrishna, the Great Master* into English] was not in good health but went through his daily routine. He said that his physical form had attained the goal for which it was born; now whether he died on the road or in a temple, it made no difference. There was no doubt in his mind, and the only hold of the world on him was compassion. He was never unbalanced, and was full of infinite compassion, grace and understanding.

As said before, one method of gaining knowledge is conceptual understanding, which comes through the senses, analysis and evaluation of the data by the mind. The other method is intuitive experience, which is free from the use of the five senses, yet one is aware of the self-evident Atman within, without any intermediary means. This gives *jñāna-trpti*, the endless satisfaction of knowledge, as all desires end, and one has reached the goal. In this kind of knowledge the intellect is first sharpened to disabuse ourselves of wrong ideas concerning the truth of the oneness of the universe and develop a conviction regarding the knowledge of Brahman. Then only the teacher takes the *jñāna-trptas* to the experi-



ence of Oneness. But this experience is totally subjective and indescribable. The teacher then uses the method of *taṭastha lakṣaṇa*, that is, if one has to go to a village on the other side of the river, the person showing the way points to a tree and says, it is on the bank of the river. Thus one locates the river and reaches his destination. This kind of use of knowledge helps reach the experience state.

Thus having attained this Atman which is all-pervasive (*sarvagam*) and One, the seers are totally satisfied. The movement of Atman is not restricted. It is *sarvagata*, while embodied souls are restricted.

So, such seers are free of movement. There is no place left where experience of Oneness does not reach, and they become *dhīrāḥ*, steady. The being, the *jīva*, becomes absolutely poised once it evolves in the awareness of Oneness. Sri Ramakrishna, having experienced his multifaceted spiritual experiences, started feeling that this variety of experiences was contradictory. Does it mean that he was confused? He asked the Divine Mother to remove his doubt, and said that Her words of assurance alone would not be enough, but if all his spiritual experiences were true, 'let this boulder jump thrice.' And to his utter joy and surprise, the boulder indeed jumped thrice!

The behaviour pattern is an expression of one's inner state of anger, forgiveness, generosity, and so on. Will this apply to a person who has gone beyond duality and attained oneness? Yes, it is possible. The grades of awareness are as follows: *aham asmi*, *aham ātmā asmi*, and *ayaṁ ātmā brahma*. A person can delink himself from the common level of body-consciousness and link himself to the consciousness of the eternal Being. When he has merged in the highest Self, then, wherever he may go, he sees only that Self. He is like an earthen pot with many holes, through which awareness of himself as Atman shines forth.

His behaviour pattern would be so noble that it will convince others of his awareness of Atman. He loves all as he loves his Self. He sees his *Iṣṭa* everywhere. So while the world remains the same, he has become different due to his realization of oneness.

*Kṛtātmā* means that he has achieved what he was born to achieve. He has delinked himself from appearance and is well-established in the awareness of Reality, and cast himself in a new mould of awareness of his original nature. In the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* the student is asked to find out the true Self by intense mental activity. He discovers it to be not the body, not the life-force, not the mind, not the intellect, but bliss [according to Śaṅkara]. The *kṛtātmā*, by persistent effort, recreates himself, qualitatively evolves himself in the awareness of Atman or Brahman. About himself, he says—not I, not I (*nāham, nāham*) but Thou, Thou (*tuhu, tuhu*). This awareness of the Atman does not call for any external accessories, but is a process of opening up one's boundaries, delimiting oneself to merge with the essence of the universe. Being a *kṛtātmā*, one automatically becomes a *vītarāga*. He no longer feels the duality of love or hate, like and dislike, and so he is a person who has conquered his emotions. He is totally separated from the two passions of human beings—attachment and aversion, so praise or blame no longer remain for him. There is only divine Love remaining, and as Sri Chaitanya said, wherever his eyes turned, he saw Sri Krishna alone.

This transformation is total and subjective. He appears to be like all normal human beings, but his awareness of the Atman changes his behaviour totally. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that the dried up coconut kernel rattles inside its shell, showing that it is totally detached from the shell. Similarly, that person is contained in the body but detached from its value system, his only value being the oneness of the whole universe. He



loses the sense of attachment which is different from true love. Without being heartless, all attachment to world-objects disappears, nor is there any infatuation or sense of acquisition, want or desire left in him. Up till now he thought of himself as a body, but now he experiences himself as a Spirit pervading the whole universe.

Being thus, he will appear as one who has achieved all that he wanted to achieve. No hankering for further achievement is found in his behaviour pattern, so he is *prasānta*, absolutely calm, poised, undisturbed, without temptation or expectation, having reached the goal. Since he is not disturbed by desire and ambition, he is absolutely at peace with himself. He is enveloped in peace and emanates peace. All questions and doubts cease to exist in whoever comes near him. One is restless due to feelings of inadequacy, incompleteness, and limitations. But now, there is no attachment or aversion, so there is peace of mind and that person is satisfied in the Atman alone. King Janaka was in that state of mind and so he said when his capital Mithila was burning that nothing of his was burnt.

The *dhīras* are absolutely poised, stable and undisturbed persons. They are very mature and stable because that which is moving in all, they have attained that—the All—totally. They live in every soul and every soul

lives in them. They are also such that their ego is continuously linked to Brahman (*yuktāt-mānaḥ*). As long as they live, the ego is there, but not separated from Brahman. They retain the body and are seen by others as normal persons, but having achieved total detachment from the body and the faculties with which this life-cycle continues, they use these for continual awareness of the oneness of the universe. The sense of *aham asmi* is now supplanted with the sense of *aham brahmāsmi*. The parameters of body and mind are broken and there is communication with the whole world, with everybody. They permeate everything, just as sugar permeates syrup. So, the devout soul is always aware of the identity of his self with the Self. Through this knowledge of his true nature he sees everything and what comes uppermost in his mind is the essence of existence, and his behaviour pattern undergoes a sea change like the eternal love of Christ and the compassion of Buddha. He then infiltrates into every atom of this universe, *sarvameva āviśanti*. Swami Vivekananda describes the difference: a person goes into *samādhi* a fool, and comes back a seer. He develops a new dimension of outlook. The predominance of name-form which has a hold on us withers away in him. He sees only his *Iṣṭa* all around—everything is Atman or Brahman.

(to be continued)

### *That was Swamiji!*

I never planned anything. I have taken things as they came. Only one idea was burning in my brain—to start the machine for elevating the Indian masses—and that I have succeeded in doing to a certain extent.... He is with me, the Beloved, He was when I was in America, in England, when I was roaming about unknown from place to place in India. What do I care about what they talk—the babies, they do not know any better. What! I, who have realized the Spirit and the vanity of all earthly nonsense, to be swerved from my path by babies' prattle! Do I look like that?

—Swami Vivekananda

# Ramakrishna and the Question of the Plurality of Religions

PROF. ANINDITA N. BALSLEV

*Prof. Balslev of the Department of Philosophy, University of Copenhagen, Denmark, has presented a precedent-setting account of the need of a deeper study of Sri Ramakrishna's ideal of religious harmony.*

As we approach the end of the present millennium, we find—contrary to the expectations of some—that we are by no means living in a 'post-religious era'. Today, if the question of religious pursuits is considered in certain quarters to be a private matter that shuns public gaze, a cursory glance at the contemporary global scene reveals a situation where the theme of religion (in many guises) plays a considerably significant role in our collective life—even in the various modes of social, political and economic exchanges and interactions. Leaving aside the other aspects of this great theme, let us focus on the public countenance of the wide range of dissensions and conflicts which are associated with the question of religious pluralism, enhancing the need to examine this phenomenon carefully. Had this issue of plurality of religions been a negligible matter, we would not encounter the uncomfortable sight where the so-called religious differences between the contending parties lead to violence and even prompt military interference, as we often see. Since world religions stand out as primary sources of group-identity, the issue calls for a deeper analysis.

The academic task of understanding the phenomenon of plurality of religions, as existing documents indicate, have assumed various forms. Viewed globally, to some, the situation is one that essentially demands a sociological or an anthropological reading, where large human aggregates owe their al-

legiance to specific belief systems, from which they derive guidance in their worldly (also other-worldly) affairs. There are others, however, in whose assessment the issue of religious pluralism today is one that requires to be treated entirely as a political question. Given the fact that some such ventures have been attempted in evaluating the role of religion in the constitution of identities of various groups, unfortunately rare are those which deal with this crucial question of 'differences' as a theme of study for the philosophy of religions.

This paper seeks to emphasize that the attitudes toward the 'otherness' of others, whose religious affiliations are different from 'ours', is a matter that needs to be dealt with first and foremost as a philosophico-religious question. For weaving such a network of ideas, it seems fruitful to direct our attention to such religious personalities—as that of the 19th century figure of Sri Ramakrishna—since it is in them, more than anywhere else, that we find the fullest expression of religious consciousness. Hence, their teachings contain important messages for all those who are concerned with this question. However, before focusing on Ramakrishna, and noting the relevance of his sayings for our present purpose, let me make a few general observations.

## *Setting the Debate*

There seem to be some fundamental



theological viewpoints that influence the formation of attitudes of members of one religious affiliation towards the 'otherness' of other world religions. It is high time these viewpoints (that may or may not be fully pronounced) are duly recognized and examined in a multi-religious forum. To be able to articulate the core ideas of distinctive traditions, in a manner so that in the process the conceptual formation of their respective identities become clear to the insiders as well as the outsiders, is itself a great challenge. It is indeed a task that lies before the representatives of specific world religions today. We must be aware of the historical forces that are at play in order to comprehend such specific legacies about the constitution of the 'otherness' of other traditions, since all these have bearing eventually in our daily transactions. As I have remarked before, there is a tendency to disregard the need for comprehending these formulations in philosophico-religious terms. The 'otherness' of other traditions understood as a part of the heritage of members of a given tradition needs to be looked at differently in our contemporary context. It is evident that treating the question of religious pluralism, along with the constitution of 'us' and 'they' as having merely historical, political or economic dimensions does not resolve the problem. Instead of manifesting a widespread reluctance to face squarely these basic questions of our time, if the representatives of different world-religions would be willing to take up this theme as a common project, such an undertaking—I am inclined to believe—might eventually have greater impact beyond being theoretically a daring adventure.

Among others, it might be of help to discern some of the common stances that one comes across in the diverse attempts at self-understanding of specific traditions as well as in their perceptions of the 'otherness' of other traditions. A direct effort in this direction is likely to disclose the philosophical relevance

and religious significance of these various positions and thereby prevent the superficial readings that continue to be derived from uninformed, perhaps often misunderstood and sometimes even wilfully misconstrued premises. That there is an ardent need for such exchanges is amply demonstrated in public discussions about conflict-ridden areas, where the contending parties often have a clear 'religious difference'. We frequently observe that reference to religion in such contexts assume a simplistic formulation, as if it is nothing more than a legitimate and a convenient mode of description of group-identities of the contending parties. What is at stake here is the understanding that the complexity of the question of religious affiliation does not end with that. This 'sense of difference' demands an in-depth analysis and its implications must be allowed to surface. It is time to highlight that the very process of conceptualization pertaining to these sensitive issues, even purely within a theoretical framework, has not yet been properly undertaken as a philosophico-religious enterprise. Given that unexamined assumptions are rampant, it would be an important lesson for all concerned to find out why interpreting the 'otherness' of another tradition is not as facile a task as it looks in the absence of an authentic conversational situation. It is also illuminating to be aware that neither is it a simple matter to vocalize the contents of one's own religious identity, distinguishing it from that of others, taking well into consideration the implications that these have for 'others'. Moreover, since the participants in such a multi-religious forum cannot institute themselves solely as 'interpreters' of their own or of another's tradition, it requires that one is prepared to see one's own tradition being 'interpreted' not only by the insiders of that tradition but also by the outsiders.

To situate this discussion in the contemporary context is to be aware of the fact that a strong sense of a need for transformation of



previous attitudes is prevalent. The rhetorical devices as in such oft-used phrases as the 'global village', 'interdependent world', 'new world order', and so on reflect the cultural impact of the technological civilization in which we live, where geographical distances no longer act as barriers to communication and travel. However, despite this general temper, what needs to be particularly noticed in the context of the present discussion is that violence among members of different denominations of the same religion and among different world religions is continuing. It is time to investigate why 'we have enough religion to hate one another but not enough to love one another,' to use the words of Jonathan Swift. A call for transformation must generate fresh interest in the question of the plurality of religions.

### *The Indian Context*

Now, turning our attention to India and to illustrate better the relevance of Ramakrishna's teachings for the question of the plurality of religions, a few general remarks about the historical and cultural scene of the subcontinent may be useful. First of all, it is to be observed that the presence of plurality of religions has been a persistent component of the Indian civilization. To a very large extent, however, the multitude of religious beliefs and practices arose from the cultural soil of the Indian subcontinent itself. Even though Jewish, Zoroastrian, Christian, and Muslim communities actually made India their home at a very early date in history due to a wide variety of reasons, their interaction with, and influence on, the major bulk of the population was rather limited. Islam and Christianity—the two major world religions—are also today the two most prominent religions of the subcontinent. How this came about is a long story. It is indeed of great interest, in this connection, to learn about the backgrounds of the religious refugees and the first converts on the Indian soil. Mention may be made of the Syrian Christians of southern India, who

claim that their origin can be traced as far back as to St. Thomas, one of the apostles of Jesus Christ.

In any case, it may be observed that Islam became a significant factor in India with the founding of the Mughal empire. The encounter with Christianity, similarly, became a matter of critical importance only after the British conquest. In other words, the historical context in which the question of plurality of religions appears gradually as a serious issue to reckon with is one in which the fact of distinct religious identities gets closely tied to the dominating political and economic forces, eventually having impact on the social life of the subcontinent.

As we know, a wide range of movements took shape from the beginning of the 19th century and in each of these there is expressed a sense of urgency prompted by the presence of diverse religious traditions, especially Islam and Christianity. The followers of most of them are still present in India. One of these which was to exert considerable influence was the Brahmo Samaj, founded by Ram-mohan Roy in 1828. An offshoot of this was the Prarthana Samaj, founded in 1867 in Bombay by Pandurang. Notable was also the Arya Samaj, founded by Swami Dayananda in 1875 which retaliated against both the Christian and Islamic proselytization with its slogan 'Back to the Vedas'. All these movements were concerned with the issues of idolatry, polytheism and caste. The leaders and participants of these movements were undoubtedly critical of the mainstream tradition and attempted to correct—not substitute—what they perceived to have gone wrong in the sphere of conceptual understanding and in terms of current practices. A study of these movements indicate the differences in their recommendations and emphasis. However, they all reaffirmed what they considered to have been valid and exemplary, thereby attempting to ameliorate 'the-then-present' In-



dia. In course of time, their respective contributions have been acknowledged and the sweep of events that led to their development has been appreciated. Now they belong, however, to a large extent to the periphery of the socio-cultural life of the subcontinent.

The attempt of this paper is to emphasize the importance of deriving a religious—not a political—reading of the phenomenon of plurality of religions. The effort, however, is not to search for any abstract transcultural frame for such an analysis. This is also why, while making a fuller exploration of the theme of plurality of religions in the Indian context, one also, apart from a study of such movements as mentioned above, has to look into the various conceptual structures of the Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jaina philosophical thinking within which there can be found abundant conceptual resources that are pertinent for a theoretical scrutiny.

### *Sri Ramakrishna's Exemplary Role*

All that has been said above is intended to paint with a broad brush a scenario that is relevant both for the theoretical concern of this paper as well as for capturing a few glimpses of the historical background that brings us to the 19th century figure of Ramakrishna. As a *sanātani*, as a traditional Bengali brahmin priest at the temple of Kali at Dakshineswar, Calcutta, Ramakrishna in no time appeared before the Bengali intelligentsia as a spiritual stalwart. Given that the Indian spirit was at a very low ebb, the figure of Ramakrishna and his religious outlook was bound to have a deep impact on those who were critically examining the ramifications of their own religious identity at this critical juncture of Indian history.

The Ramakrishna movement could be studied fruitfully, noting its specific characteristics, along with the other movements of 19th century India. However, in this short

figure of Ramakrishna and his sayings as an example of those religious personalities who, while being revered intensely by members of any given community, have also taken the question of plurality of religions seriously. It seems to me that a fresh look at the lives and sayings of such persons, no matter in which cultural soil, can definitely add an important dimension to the ongoing discussions about the topic. All the more so, as the voice of religious personalities, who are perceived to be truly free from other pulls, other agendas, who can lay bare before us what religious consciousness must not be confused with, has always been rare in human history.

I have chosen to listen to the voice of Ramakrishna precisely because one seldom comes across a religious figure of his stature in whose life and utterances there is a positive awareness of the presence of a multitude of religious traditions. His saying [in Bengali], '*Jato mat, tato path*' (As many persuasions/views, so many paths) is directed towards instilling a constructive and respectful attitude to not exclusively one but all religions. Here we are confronted with a person who was guided by no other goal, swayed by no other motive, having no hidden agenda, as countless probings by his contemporaries and by other individuals belonging to the generations that came after him have revealed, than what he regarded as the 'highest goal' (*paramārtha*) of human life.

Ramakrishna's life and sayings offer us a solution by recognizing the legitimacy of different paths. While others doubted and debated, as we still do, about the eventual fate of plurality of religions, it may be worthwhile to strive to meet the challenge of the answer that was given by him. To say this is not to single him out as a unique source but to be open to receive the resources that may be derived for this purpose from any religious tradition.



Let me now ask, in which sense can he be said to have shown us a way out of the impasse to which the usual speculations on the topic lead us? As I review the scene of the late 19th century Bengal, the most significant impact of Ramakrishna for posterity does not seem to lie in the innovation of still one more cult or creed in that fertile soil where a number of religious views and practices have already been part and parcel of the cultural landscape, nor exclusively in the fact that those who saw him were willing to bestow on him the status of an avatar. It is rather that he in a subtle and candid manner conveyed the very meaning of religious consciousness, both by being a living embodiment of it himself and by validating the diversity of religious experience through his teaching, emphatically claiming that this is not a monopoly of any one religious tradition.

We will direct our attention to this message, a priceless contribution towards inter-religious understanding. We will argue that his famous words, 'As many faiths, so many paths,' which echo everywhere in Bengal, making it a household phrase there, deserves a hearing in distant lands more than it has already had. As one looks deeper into that position, one comes to detect a set of themes that warrant development into a broader study. However, I would outline here a contour of some of the principal ideas which can be accommodated within the compass of this short paper.

At the outset, let me observe that, seen even in the background of 19th century India, Ramakrishna's message was not simply a patriotic urge, a call for social transformation, a judgement passed on any fundamental rightness or wrongness of a specific religious tradition or of any denomination of a major religion. He was not painting the picture of an ideal situation where—in some dim and distant future—the problem of plurality of religions was to be solved. It is rather a way of

looking at diversity that does not call for organizing any plurality of traditions in a hierarchical order, where one out of the many persuasions/points of view has to be privileged or declared as a fulfilment of the others, nor does it require that the validation of one implies a rejection of others. His famous saying 'As many ways, so many paths' was no hollow slogan. It acquired its power from the fact that the words were uttered by one who preached what he practised.

All the more reason for those concerned with this issue to perceive that the position was not born of any political prudence or a simple reiteration of a 'live and let live' formula but out of a claim that has its basis in a living experience. Historical documents of the period disclose that Ramakrishna actually practised not only various forms of sadhana, prescribed and preserved by different Brahmanical and Tantric communities, but also observed certain practices recommended by Christianity and Islam. Some records are available that document how and through whom he actually got to learn these specific modes of practices. Thus, those who heard him deeply appreciated the persuasive force of that statement, which was free from all coercion.

This is certainly not a specimen of 'Neo-Hindu inclusivism' as some have claimed,<sup>1</sup> describing the position as one for which 'Vedanta provided the encompassing context within which Christianity, like all other religions, was contained and a priori superseded.' This remark is unfortunate, as it fails to appreciate the idea that a recognition of other per-

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1. Cf. Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe*, p. 52. Halbfass goes on in that vein and says that one 'may even suspect that the development of the idea of fulfilment among the Christian missionaries, in part at least, was a response to Neo-Hindu inclusivism, as we find it exemplified by Ramakrishna....' etc.



suasions as 'other paths' is not designated as a position to win over others. A multi-religious forum is indeed missing where such and similar readings can be discussed so that the implications of such conceptual moves can be disclosed.

It may be urged, and perhaps rightly so, that the quintessence of Ramakrishna's message is not by any means altogether new in the Indian subcontinent. There has been always embedded in the tradition ideas that allow for an upsurge of a wide variety of religious persuasions. The inner spiritual dynamism within the *sanātana dharma* has given rise to and has retained up to this day a wide range of expressions. Consequently, if there are those which are idolatrous, there are others which are iconoclastic. If some have conceived the Ultimate in personal terms and as having a form, there are others who have expressed it as impersonal and formless. There is indeed a very old tradition which inspires us to view the 'otherness' of other traditions as equally legitimate. In this connection, a few key ideas can be pointed out that seem to have influenced and guided Hindu attitudes in this area of life. One of these ideas, documented in the *R̥g Veda* itself, is that the Real is one but sages call it by different names (*ekam sat, viprā bahudhā vadanti*). It is possible that familiarity with such views help a genuine appreciation when it is reflected in Ramakrishna's own teachings, in his parables and imageries.

The idea that people are of different spiritual temperament and that accordingly they need to freely choose the path that suits them best has also been present. Ramakrishna has again and again emphasized that it is dogmatism (calling it *matuārā buddhi* in Bengali) to think that only a specific path is valid, and all others are wrong.

However, to interpret Ramakrishna as another example of what was said in the fold

of the *sanātana dharma* from time immemorial is a relatively simpler task than to read the significance of his message first in the historical context of 19th century India and then to derive from it what there is which pertains to our contemporary situation. It is to be remembered that even if this train of thinking has been present in the *sanātana dharma* from time immemorial, his personality and parables, his utterances and attitudes exemplified the power of those ideas. By his very presence he gave a new direction to people's thoughts at a critical stage when the question of religion was poignantly alive in the context of the political power struggle of that time. His was a personality of such spiritual height that he was himself seen as an exemplification of what he taught to be the goal of the religious quest, enabling those concerned to perceive how this pursuit is to be distinguished from all other pursuits with which lesser souls have often confused it.

### Conclusion

The question of plurality of religions is and has always been of special significance in the Indian subcontinent. If Indian culture can be said to bear a distinct character of its own, the presence of a religious pluralism in the Indian soil since antiquity is certainly one of the identifying traits by which it can be distinguished from other major cultures. This is why, unlike in many countries today (many of which are mono-religious), where the question of diversity in religious contexts is mainly sought to be dealt with in socio-political terms, we find documented in the ancient Indian literature attempts to treat the question in philosophico-religious terms. There has been, and there will always be, conceptual differences about how to comprehend what Tillich described as the 'ultimate concern'. There is no dearth of a variety of religious symbolisms, and for that matter polemical literature, in India about representations and conceptions of the Ultimate.



As an example of how Ramakrishna dealt with these issues, read the following: 'Remember this, too,' Ramakrishna said to Vijaykrishna Goswami, a very respected person of the Brahma Samaj, 'if you believe that God is formless, then stick to that belief with firm conviction. But don't be dogmatic: never say emphatically about God that He can be only this and not that. You may say: "I believe that God is formless. But He can be many things more. He alone knows what else He can be. I do not know; I do not understand."'2

To understand the words of Ramakrishna is to recognize the fact that imposition of certain fixed dogmas, views or practices only make way to fanaticism and bigotry. No doubt that in this sense, Ramakrishna represented the deepest religious sentiments of the eternal India where the fundamental thrust has always been '...to accommodate any sectarian creed that has succeeded in demonstrating the efficacy of a practical method of realizing spiritual truths.'3 No doubt, there is a need to keep this message alive in present-day India.

Today, while we speak of living in a 'global village', not to be able to break through the particularity of one's own tradition and recognize the 'other' religious traditions also as expressions of the pervading religious consciousness of humanity must be acknowledged as a theological failure. It is a sort of bankruptcy of religious thinking which in its rigid conceptual formulations must decline the legitimacy of plurality of religions. To put it in the inimitable words of Tillich, 'In the depth of every living religion

there is a point at which the religion itself loses its importance, and that to which it points breaks through its particularity.'4

It is indeed a conceptual struggle before us to express that experience to which the greatest religious personalities had access. That any tradition should claim any monopoly of that, is a triviality to be avoided. This is precisely why the figure of Sri Ramakrishna is not only significant in the socio-political context of 19th century India, he also holds out a message for all of us who, at the threshold of the 21st century, are witnessing and even powerlessly participating in a battle of vested interests where the question of religion is but a pawn in political hands.

Thus, it needs to be emphasized that dealing with this theme calls for a much deeper involvement than just entering into such debates as whether the fact of religious pluralism is just a provisional state of affairs to be transcended in course of time or is here to stay as long as human beings inhabit this planet. The point that I am seeking to make is that today, even when meetings are organized precisely with the goal of bringing various religious communities together, it is rare to come across such endeavours where the primary aspiration is to understand the meaning of religious quest in the face of the presence of a plurality of religions and attempt a thorough conceptual exploration of various issues concerning the phenomenon. A simple search for similarity and differences need not be the sole aspiration while facing this fact of plurality of religions. Perhaps a lack of our collective effort in this direction is the reason why the presence of diverse world religions is generally perceived to be more as a problem than as a resource for humanity.

2. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1985), p. 634.

3. Swami Nirvedananda, 'Sri Ramakrishna and Spiritual Renaissance' in *The Cultural Heritage of India* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1969), Vol. 4, p. 656.

4. Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions* (New York, 1963).



# Free Will as a Non-objective Component of Historical Reality

PROF. GEOFFREY CHEW

*Dr. Geoffrey F. Chew, Professor Emeritus in Physics, University of California at Berkeley, is on the advisory board of the Agency for Human Interconnectedness through Manifestation of Spiritual Awareness (AHIMSA). What follows is a transcription of a beautiful lecture he delivered at an AHIMSA conference.*

Let me propose a distinction between *objective reality* and *historical reality*—distinction that parallels David Bohm's celebrated recognition of *implicate order* as opposed to explicate order. Objective reality will be recognized in my talk as only a *portion* of historical reality albeit the only portion that science has so far been able sharply to define. I shall entertain the possibility that *free will* or *choice* constitutes a mathematically-definable component of history not encompassed by objective reality.

Rather than confronting the entire concept of consciousness, I choose to concentrate today on its free-will aspect. The impact of free will on history is a fascinating mystery. I judge this mystery to stand a chance of illumination by the *methods* of natural science even if choice locates *outside* the usual definition of science. I shall be using the terms *choice* and *free will* interchangeably. I must warn you that my use of the term *history* will be unconventional, for example, by including future as well as past, but let me defer my definition of historical reality in favour of the more familiar objective reality. Definition of this latter term already requires care. By objective reality I refer to those aspects of our universe that are characterizable as matter in the extremely general sense introduced by Einstein. In Einstein's sense, matter is synonymous with *localized energy*, so light and gravity as well as atoms are forms of matter.

Ever since the astounding successes of Isaac Newton three hundred years ago, physics, (which was originally called *natural philosophy*), has been based on energy localized in space and time. Twentieth century science was forced by experimental observation of matter at small scales to introduce a set of principles called *quantum mechanics*—principles that entail noncausal uncertainty aspects which continue today after decades of study to baffle the wisest humans; often these aspects are called *non-objective* and as you will hear later, I agree that they should be so described. But quantum mechanics as heretofore formulated has failed to dislodge the status of localized energy—ie *matter*—as the underpinning of natural philosophy. What I today am calling *objective reality* includes not only gravity, light, electrons, and any other forms of *matter* but the quantum-mechanical representation thereof as described in the most advanced graduate courses given in the world's most prestigious universities. (These courses, by the way, avoid like the plague the noncausal implications of quantum mechanics. Noncausality is threatening to professors of physics, even though they love to teach quantum mechanics.)

The achievements of a science based on matter have been so impressive as to raise hopes for an eventual *materialistic theory of everything*. Such a theory would embrace the subject of this meeting. How is it conceivable



that the phenomenon called *consciousness* and the attendant *free will* might be manifestations of localized energy? A persuasive consideration is that free will affects the behaviour of matter: I decide to raise my arm and matter responds. Given such linkage between matter and free will, is it not reasonable to seek understanding of consciousness through energy? Success would mean absence from the universe of any content beyond what I am here calling *objective reality*.

Hint of *incompleteness* in objective reality arises in an aspect of natural philosophy that associates with the name of Galileo. In the century before that of Newton, Galileo drew attention to the value of *objective measurements*—reproducible experiments with matter—as a guide to the development of natural philosophy. Physicists and others calling themselves *natural scientists* have come subsequently to define *truth* within their discipline as a set of ideas that stand the test of reproducible experiments on matter. Because the consequences of free will for matter are by definition not reproducible, no theory of free will could be *scientifically* verified. Immunity to objective verification suggests that free will is not part of objective reality.

On the other hand, science has managed to adapt itself to the notion of *evolution* both in biology and in cosmology. In cosmology, the synonym for evolution is *expansion of universe*. Evolution of our universe, by ensuring that *in principle* no experiment is reproducible, might seem to eliminate the basis of a science based on measurement; because tomorrow will be different from today, tomorrow's experiment *cannot* duplicate exactly the conditions of today's experiment. But physicists, long before the expansion of universe was appreciated, understood that any experimental measurement is accompanied by an *error* that *in principle* cannot be reduced to zero. *Galilean truth*, although no more than approximation, is a useful guide to natural

philosophy because tomorrow will be *approximately* like today. Approximate representations of reality by science are the most that can be hoped; some representations, by being more successful than others in Galileo's sense, may be characterized as *more truthful*. Progress occurs with any increase of *Galilean truthfulness* in science's representation of reality.

Once absolute truth is recognized as unverifiable by experimental test, one hesitates to declare as manifest nonsense the search for a *materialistic* theory of consciousness and free will. Well-documented bizarre behaviour of matter subject to quantum mechanics has encouraged such an approach. Current efforts are vigorous to develop an energy-based quantum theory of consciousness.

My presentation today will nevertheless emphasize an alternative to materialistic free will—an *alternative* brought to my attention by a quantum-cosmological model. Although I have been studying this model for the past decade, only recently have I come to appreciate the model's possible relevance to the free will mystery. I shall suggest to you that objective reality may be only one aspect of a broader *historical reality*. Although important features of universe history are unquestionably describable through localized energy, the cosmological model causes me to believe that the totality of historical features is not objectively embraced.

Such a conjecture might seem meaningful only *outside* the domain of science. So it would be *if* science continues to be based on matter—ie to be objective; but perhaps natural science can shift its basis to *history*. Seventy years ago, the mathematician-philosopher Alfred North Whitehead suggested subordinating the concept of localized matter to that of localized *event*. Whitehead identified matter with *regular patterns* of huge numbers of events. *Regularity* of event pattern provided



Whitehead with meaning for the identity of objects. (A bit later I shall ask each of you to think of the objective aspect of yourself as a pattern of events that displays a certain regularity.) A single chain of Whiteheadian events constitutes the history of the universe and every event influences and is influenced by every other event, but not all event patterns within localized regions of space and time can exhibit the causal regularity interpretable as matter. Whitehead's historical reality leaves room for non-objective content.

Although Whitehead's idea has engaged the attention of philosophers, only recently has it found its way into a quantum-mechanical mode of universe evolution. In this model, individual events, even though not carrying energy, have electromagnetic properties and to each there attaches an *impulse*, (a *blow*). At an event something happens, even though not to an object.

Certain pairs of events are electromagnetically *connected* to each other according to familiar Einsteinian principles of relativity and causality, but *all* events, whether or not *causally connected*, are interrelated inasmuch as they all lie along a *single* cosmological *chain of history*. This chain meanders in time, sometimes moving forward and sometimes backward. Reversal of chain direction, a notion that no doubt boggles your mind, relates to *big bang*—another mind-boggling notion, but one that the media have somehow caused to become familiar to non-cosmologists. Public speakers are allowed to use the term *big bang* without explanation. I ask the same indulgence with respect to the term, *time meandering in the chain of history*. Meandering in time-direction of the chain of events that constitutes history allows certain components of historical reality to be noncausally connected (future influences past). The objective component of historical reality, on the other hand, is characterized by causal connections in certain special segments of history where the event

chain does not meander.

Meaning for energy, and thus for matter and *objects*, arises in event cosmology from the regularity of certain extended event patterns with extremely special structure. The objective component of history resides in a tightly-woven two-dimensional *fabric* of events. The pattern of this fabric is intricate.

Any loose strands of the history chain, not woven into material fabric, would correspond to non-objective (non-material) aspects of the universe even though built of events that, *individually*, are of the same type that build objective reality. Such loose strands, which may meander, would influence the objective component of history, although not causally—ie, not in the way one piece of matter influences another.

*Regularity* of fabric pattern with advancing time provides meaning for matter. Is it possible that *all* events fall into matter-interpretable fabric? Certainly not in the very early universe. According to the model, the *radius* of the universe shortly after the big bang was smaller than the size of the smallest matter-defining event patterns by a factor of about one hundred (smaller than a single elementary particle). There was no *original* material fabric; energy had no meaning until after some expansion of the universe. After sufficient expansion, many event strands condensed into objective fabric, but would it be surprising if some strands of our present universe remain *loose*—outside the fabric? The mathematical structure of event cosmology in fact *requires* occurrence within the history of the universe at any age of events *outside* the fabric of objective reality.

How would event strands *not* woven into objective history manifest themselves? Absence of causal-fabric confinement suggest *instability* and *unpredictability*. These words leap to mind when imagining the role of loose



events in universe history. Their influence cannot be described by a causal materialistic science that recognizes only the objective component of history. Might *loose strands* of history underlie what we call *consciousness* and *free will*? I have been unable to find a persuasive argument to the contrary.

Nonmaterial events might also relate to the spooky *collapse* of quantum-mechanical matter wave functions—a collapse that by violating causality caused Einstein never to accept quantum mechanics. In event cosmology, all events, whether part of material fabric or in loose strands, are localized and carry electromagnetic properties. Nevertheless, although those events that build matter exhibit causal electromagnetic connection, *loose strands* need not obey Einstein's causality.

As a physicist I am concentrating my efforts on *regular* event fabric to see if hitherto-mysterious features of elementary particles can be illuminated. (Illumination, if achieved, would constitute important support for the model.) But I cannot keep my thoughts from occasionally wandering to loose event strands. When I speak of loose strands, all I mean is strands that are not part of the extremely-special event fabric interpretable as matter. It is impractical for me to here describe the structure of a matter-defining pattern of events. Suffice it to say that, like the double helix of protein molecules that provides basis for life as we know it, the pattern of events that provide meaning for matter is *extremely* special. Many *other* event patterns are conceivable, and among alternatives it is easy to imagine candidates for the component of history that we call free will. A key ingredient of such a candidate is a negative feature: *absence* of a special repetitive and causal regularity in time that characterizes matter.

For an *object* to *exist*, there must be a repetition in time of the associated event pattern—a repetition that can be described as

*persistence*. Think of yourself as an aggregate of events extended over decades. Your *identity* depends upon your event pattern, tomorrow bearing similarity to today's pattern. If the pattern changes too much, you will not tomorrow be identifiable as the same individual. So it is with an elementary particle. So it is with any matter. On the other hand, by exercise of free will you will feel mysteriously capable of changing your identity (such as jumping into a vat of sulphuric acid) and thereby altering the history of the universe. The choice seems to be there independent of your objective identity. Maybe *choice* associates itself with loose noncausal event strands.

Why should the mysterious phenomenon of choice influence only event patterns corresponding to *living matter*? What about elementary particles? My colleague, Henry Stapp, who thinks a great deal about such matters, is encouraging me to consider the possibility that certain events not tied up in matter fabric account for the noncausal unpredictability aspects of quantum mechanics.

And now, as I approach my conclusion, let me report to you that the mathematics of event cosmology does not tolerate a *unique* history of the universe. History unavoidably depends on *standpoint*, where the model's notion of *standpoint* is not vague but sharply defined. Roughly speaking, the notion corresponds to *here* and *now*. According to event cosmology, the degree of objectivity in the history perceived from a selected standpoint tends to increase with distance of events from that standpoint. An equivalent statement is that loose-event non-objective components of history concentrate on events that tend to be close to the standpoint. Agreement between the different histories perceived from different standpoints lies in the objective components not too close to any of the selected standpoints. Such statements, while sounding philosophical rather than scientific, enjoy *mathematical* representation within event cos-



mology. They were not built in but, to my amazement, have emerged as apparently unavoidable features of a chain of events that builds history.

Nearly two decades ago, David Bohm wrote an intriguing little book, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, distinguishing what he called *implicate order* from *explicate order*. Although Bohm ignored evolution, I like to identify what I have called *the objective reality of localized energy* with Bohm's *explicate order*. *Explicate order* would comprise that very special component of event history that is bound up in tightly-woven matter fabric. *Implicate order* would be complete history—a meandering chain of events only a portion of which lies within the fabric of objective reality. The remainder inaccessible to objective science and perhaps embracing consciousness, choice, and wave-function collapse is nevertheless essential to the whole.

In conclusion, I remark that, in event cosmology, the history of our present universe is finite. The total number of events is huge but not infinite and, unsurprisingly, relates numerically to what is called the 'age' of our universe—about 15 billion years. History of our universe, as seen from the present, comprises a finite past together with a finite future. As age increases the boundary of future keeps receding so we never catch up.

There will always be a future as well as a past.

Because the total number of events building history increases with universe age, it is plausible that qualitatively-new pattern of events will develop indefinitely. Remember that the tightly-woven fabric of objectivity could not exist when the universe was very young. Conversely, when the universe is much older than it is today, event patterns may develop with an impact that goes beyond that of matter and consciousness.

Coming back to the present and near future and to human efforts towards enlightenment, event cosmology must eventually identify explicitly-detailed *loose-strand* event patterns interpretable as free will, if the proposal I am putting forward today is to survive. Momentarily, however, my own efforts are focusing not on free will but details of the objective event fabric interpretable as light. As a physicist I feel compelled to give higher priority to light than free will. After light the fabric of gravity must be understood. After gravity will come the event structure of particles such as electrons. But exertions in my physicist identity will not cause me to forget free will. Understanding *anything* about an event pattern associable with choice would eclipse in satisfaction any imaginable *physical* understanding generated by event cosmology. □

### *Reconciling Self-effort and Mercy...*

How can self-effort and mercy of God be harmonised? These two appear to be contradictory, but it is not so. Self-effort is also a gift of God, His mercy. Devotees without manliness are of a lower class. See how virile and heroic were the devotees, Mahavira, Arjuna and Prahlada! Hanuman had no fear even of crossing the sea; he crossed it in one bound shouting 'Victory to Rama!' ... Arjuna's prowess is universally known. There are many hundreds of other shining examples....

—Swami Virajananda



# Reviews and Notices

**PANCHASTAVI: By Jankinath Kaul 'Kamal'. Published by Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, Sivalaya, P.O. Karan Nagar, Srinagar, Kashmir 190010. 1996. Pp. xxx + 320. Rs. 95.**

Here is a bouquet of five mystic hymns in praise of Mahā Tripurasundarī—the divine consort of Śiva. These stanzas unfold the path of kuṇḍalinī yoga also. They also indicate the *krama yoga* of Kāśmīr Śaivism. All the five hymns (*pañca* means five and *stava* means hymns) presented here assume the form of a lily with five petals, each petal symbolizing consciousness (*cit*), bliss (*ānanda*), volition (*icchā*), knowledge (*jñāna*), and activity (*kriyā*). The supreme Mother manifests Herself through these glorious powers to Her ardent devotees. The enlightened devotee eulogizes Her through this pentad of hymns.

Thus, while 'Laghustava' highlights the dynamic power of the Mother, 'Carcāstava' is more reflective in its content. The words in 'Carcāstava' reveal the *binba-pratibinba bhāva*. It also reveals that *parā vāk* is the source of *paśyanti*, *madhyamā* and *vaikhari*. The spiritual way indicated in 'Carcāstava' is also known as *śaktopāya*. The third *stava* viz 'Ghaṭastava' plays with the idea that the universe in its unmanifested form remains in a pitcher. As the earlier *stavas* indicate *kriyopāya* and *jñānopāya*, this *stava* indicates *sāmbhavopāya*. In the *tantras*, this is also known as *icchā yoga*. It is an achievement not on one's own but through divine grace. The fourth *stava* is 'Ambāstava'. Ambā is *nanda śakti*—the source of bliss. Here also no particular efforts are needed to merge in the bliss indicated in this *stava*. The last of the *stavas* is 'Śakala-janani-stava'. Here, the supreme Mother is called *sakala-janani*, the sovereign Creatrix of the cosmos in her *cit* aspect. Parameśvara is described here as the supreme Divinity with whom Śakti, the infinite Power, lies in eternal union.

All the five hymns taken together spell out a deep Advaitic philosophy, but only to the initiated. Others will just enjoy the poetry in praise of the Mother. The book has been designed for both superficial readers and sincere aspirants. Casual readers will find the poetry in the hymns beautiful and elevating. But a more intensive study will open different vistas of divine glory before spiritual aspirants.

The author, Prof. Kaul 'Kamal', has collated twelve different MSS to arrive at this critical edi-

tion. Variant readings are given in footnotes and explanatory notes are quite elaborate. He has recorded the original sources and has cited extracts wherever necessary. He has taken care that the translation of the stanzas is lucid and enough care is also taken to record double meanings in the translations. Prof. Kaul was better placed to undertake this work. He is a blessed soul to receive the grace of his guru, Bhai Laxman Joo. His deep study of indology and Vedānta philosophy along with that of Śākta mysticism and Kāśmīr Śaivism stood him in good stead in elaborating the subtle meanings of most of the mystic stanzas in these hymns. At places he has used charts and some esoteric figures to make certain ideas clear. The book contains six plates having pictures and photographs of Parā Bhāṭṭārikā Tripura Sundarī, Śrī Rājñā Bhagavatī, Vaiṣṇavī Mātā and the temple of Śrī Sārikā Bhagavatī. The diagrams of *triśūla*, *trikoṇa*, ellipses contained in *anuttara*, *tāṭaṅka* and *catuṣṭaya* and *saṭkoṇa mudrā*, all with suitable explanations, would prove extremely useful to all serious readers of this book.

The alphabetical index at the end is of great help in locating the stanzas for those who have not learnt the hymns by heart. It would have been better if all the hymns were printed at one place for facility of recitation. In a book like this, printing errors are likely to confuse ordinary readers. The printing and paper are good and the design on the jacket depicting symbolically the glory of Siva-Pārvatī is significant. The book has an elucidative foreword by the late M.P. Pandit and an appreciative preamble by MM Dr. Shashidhar Sharma, the well-known Tantra scholar of the Department of Sanskrit, Punjab University, Chandigarh. The book fulfils a longfelt need of the devotees of the Divine Mother.

**Dr. N. B. Patil,**  
Director of Languages  
Mumbai

**THE ZAFARNAMA OF GURU GOBIND SINGH: Translated by Jasbir Kaur Ahuja. Published by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Kulapati Munshi Marg, Mumbai 400007. 1996. Pp. 32+20. Rs. 35.**

Since the school syllabus in India is singularly bereft of the basic information about the Sikh religion, history and lore, few people know that



*Gurbani* is replete with lyrical poetry of divine love. Its Vaishnavite and Sufi overtones and references have an extraordinary relevance to the prevalent theme of interfaith harmony and its perennial message of universal love for all God's creation. Some of the sacred hymns in Farsi cannot be understood without at least a nodding acquaintance with Persian. Through *Gurbani's* underlying principle of divine love runs an appeal for compassion, *ahimsa* and non-aggression.

The Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan has brought out this English rendering of the *Zafarnama* of Guru Gobind Singhji Maharaj by Miss Jasbir Kaur Ahuja, well-known educator and author, whose writings are familiar to the readers of the *Prabuddha Bharata*. Rendering a sacred text from a classical language to modern English is always a challenging task. Guru Gobind Singh's *Zafarnama* is a masterpiece of chaste Persian verse. It is indeed encapsulated history, autobiography, drama and philosophy, all rolled into an inspiring outpouring of the Guru—*Sacha patshah* addressing an earthly king. The most significant part, and one which is oft-quoted, is Guru Gobind Singh's justification for taking recourse to war against tyranny: 'When repression and tyranny exceed all bounds of forbearance, we have divine right to unsheath the sword of God (*Chun kar az hama hilat'e dar-guzasht; Halal ast burdan ba shamshir dast*).' That terse message spells the axiomatic truth which forever qualifies the essentially peaceful and non-violent character of the Sikh struggle. It also seems to hark back to Sri Krishna's doctrinal statement in the *Gītā*: '*Yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir bhavati bhārata....*' The *Zafarnama* thus symbolizes the invincible spirit of humanity.

Guru Gobind Singh writes in righteous indignation about the barbarity of Aurangzeb's viceroy at Sirhind who ordered the two younger sons of the tenth Guru to be entombed alive, and rebukes him for the violation of solemn vows as well as the emperor's personal assurances of safety. How the 'letter of victory' evoked deep remorse in Aurangzeb, how the ageing and ailing emperor invited the Guru to the Deccan, but died soon afterwards in Aurangabad is another story.

Miss Jasbir Kaur has captured the pathos and austere grandeur of the original poetry, thanks to the insightful assistance of her scholarly father, S. Manohar Singh Sarhadi, who is an expert in Farsi. The Introduction is integral to the book, which the author has gratefully dedicated to the late Swami Tapasyanandaji, the monk who encouraged her to disseminate the history and philosophy of Sikhism among general readers.

**Sri Saran Singh**  
Editor, *The Sikh Review*

**EKĀNNO PĪTH (Bengali):** By Purba Sengupta. Published by Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 10 Shyama Charan Dey Street, Calcutta, 700073. 1998. Pp. 194. Rs.65.

Approaching God as Mother is one of the significant aspects of spirituality which was given currency by Sri Ramakrishna. His total commitment to this concept has acquired for him the name of 'Divine Mother's child' and for those who subscribe to the teachings of this great master the motherhood of Divinity is today one of the commonest approaches to God-realization. God as Mother is considered to be more endearing and conducive to greater intimacy with the Divine than God as Father which patriarchy has for long perpetuated. Since the mother is a symbol of love that transcends the ordinary human varieties of that emotion, the love of the mother is seen to come closest to the kind of all-encompassing love which the Divine showers over all the created beings.

To show that the worship of Śakti is as old as the first formulations of Hindu mythology is a laudable attempt which Purba Sengupta has taken up in the present volume. She begins with the mention of the numerous variations found in the number and description of these seats of veneration of Śakti through the length and breadth of India. Narrating the story of Sati's death and cutting up of her body into small parts to save the cosmos from extinction forms the background of the volume. Interestingly, the author draws similarities between this incident and the one in Greek mythology about Osiris and Isis.

The Śakti *pīthas* grew around places where the pieces of the hallowed body fell. Explicit charts with the name of the part of the body, geographic location of these places and names of specific forms of deities worshipped in all these seats add to the clarity of this interesting volume. The author has expressed herself with lucidity and simplicity which will help the common reader to get familiar with the relevant details associated with all the fifty-one pilgrim centres which have been dealt with at great length and some subsidiary centres which have been briefly mentioned.

Of course, the details are well-documented and descriptions well-researched which will be beneficial to others who are carrying out research in this field. From the human interest angle a couple of stories about the power of the Tantric tradition narrated have added to the value of the volume.

In addition, there is a note of commitment and devotion which characterizes the author's exposition which seems eminently suitable to the subject



of the volume. This saves the volume from the stigma of dry scholarship without plunging into the abyss of excessive sentimentality or blind faith.

One further point to note is the social significance which the author assigns to these fifty-one seats of mother-worship scattered all over the country; she sees this as a pointer to the integration of apparently diverse tendencies prevalent in this vast nation, an attempt to integration that is not limited to post-independence India but is as old as the country's existence as an independent entity.

All these make the volume worth reading and it is hoped that the author will consider making available an English translation of the volume so that a wider reading public can benefit from such an exhaustive study.

**Dr. Sumita Roy**

Associate Professor of English  
Osmania University, Hyderabad

**SANSKRIT RAMAYANAS OTHER THAN VALMIKI'S—THE ADBHUTA, ADHYATMA AND ANANDA RAMAYANAS: By Dr. V. Raghavan. Published by Dr. V. Raghavan Centre for Performing Arts, 1 Bhaktavatsalam Nagar, Adyar, Chennai 600020. 1998. Pp. xv+143. Rs.100.**

The two great epics of India, viz *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* delineate a universal code of conduct through their themes. They are also rich in myths and legends that reflect the noble and inferior qualities of humanity in contrast. Many of these myths and legends are truly suggestive and symbolic, having an ethnic and deep philosophical background. All the religious sects and philosophical schools in India, particularly the Vedanta and the Agama schools, have utilized the two epics to present their own religious and philosophical thought, either by commenting on them, or by retelling the stories in the form of digests with new names. This has resulted in a large number of *Ramayana* versions in Sanskrit, Prakrit, medieval and modern Indian languages, and even in languages outside India. The present book deals with three Sanskrit *Ramayana* digests other than Valmiki's *Ramayana*. They are the *Adbhuta*, *Adhyatma*, and *Ananda Ramayanas*. Essentially, this book is a compilation of a series of lectures on these *Ramayanas*.

The *Adbhuta Ramayana* presents Shakta religion and philosophy. Several of Sita's 1000 names described in this *Ramayana* identify her with the consort of Siva, viz Bhavani, Ambika, Parvati, etc. Certain structural changes in the story are also

found. For instance, Sita is said to be the daughter of Senior Ravana, the elder brother of the ten-faced Ravana, who had a thousand faces, and who was destroyed by Sita, assuming the form of Kali.

The second *Ramayana* digest included here is the *Adhyatma Ramayana*, and as suggested by the name itself, it has a philosophical orientation. Many verses, sometimes in a series, are taken from the *Bhagavadgita*. It also has similarity with *Agastya Samhita*, but it follows closely the course of the story as given in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. As is the case of the *stotras* and discourses in the *Bhagavata*, in this work too, the Upanishadic terms and passages are incorporated. Even the *mahavakyas* are referred to. It also affirms knowledge alone as the means of liberation. Here, Rama is held as not only an incarnation of Vishnu, but as one above the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra.

The third one is the *Ananda Ramayana*. From the point of view of variations, innovations and incorporation of popular story-elements, the last one is the most interesting among the three *Ramayanas*. Its story line follows mostly the first one, but it narrates especially the life of Rama after his coronation, enjoying his rule and making all those around happy. In contrast to the suffering displayed in the other *Ramayanas*, this *Ramayana* introduces a number of pleasant events, particularly the *vilasa* and *vivaha kandas*. This justifies its name. Philosophical and moral principles are also conveyed here.

The index at the end of the book enhances the value of this work. In the course of his lectures on these three *Ramayanas*, Dr. Raghavan neatly presents their contents, compares them with the Valmiki version, states deviations and changes, and derives philosophical implications.

Dr. Raghavan is a great scholar, and has done a commendable job through his critical exposition of the less known *Ramayanas*. The scholarly world and the general public are indebted to him for this meticulous research.

**Dr. Chetana Mandavia**

Professor of Plant Physiology  
Gujarat Agricultural University, Ahmedabad

Vedanta is the essence of religion.  
When you have seen the full moon in  
all its glory, who cares to look at a  
painting of the moon on canvas?

—Swami Turiyananda



## TWO IMPORTANT LETTERS

*[We reported the Ramakrishna Mission's receiving the Gandhi Peace Prize last month. Two important letters concerning the prize, written to Swami Smarananandaji, the General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, by the President of India, Dr. K.R. Narayanan, and the Prime Minister, Sri Atal Behari Vajpayee, are published below.]*



राष्ट्रपति  
भारत गणतंत्र  
PRESIDENT  
REPUBLIC OF INDIA

13 February 1999

Dear Swami Smaranananda,

This is with reference to your letter of 26.1.1999 and its enclosures.

The ceremony at Raj Bhavan, Calcutta when I handed over the Gandhi Peace Prize 1998 to Swami Ranganathananandaji, was a brief but memorable event. All those present felt the living grace of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda and of the Ramakrishna Order.

I am glad to have the report of the Ramakrishna Mission's service to the tribal people of India. I do hope this work of the Mission gets to be better known and emulated.

With regards,

Yours sincerely,

  
(K.R. Narayanan)

Swami Smaranananda,  
General Secretary,  
Ramakrishna Mission,  
P.O. Belur Math,  
Dist. Howrah,  
West Bengal – 711202.





प्रधान मंत्री  
PRIME MINISTER

New Delhi  
February 3, 1999

Dear Swami Smaranananda,

I have received your letter of January 26, 1999 and am glad to know that Ramakrishna Mission has been chosen for the Gandhi Peace Prize 1998. Your work is well known. I am sure others will be inspired to take up similar venture. My congratulations to you on the Mission being awarded this prestigious award and best wishes for the future.

With regards,

Yours sincerely,

(A.B. Vajpayee)

Swami Smaranananda  
General Secretary  
Ramakrishna Mission  
P.O. Belur Math  
Dist. Howrah - 711 202  
West Bengal